



MAHOUKA KOUKOU NO RETTOUSEI
MASTER CLANS CONFERENCE CHAPTER (I)

SATOU TSUTOMU



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魔法科高校の劣等生17

師族会議編〈上〉

*The irregular
at magic high school*

佐島勤

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魔法科高校の劣等生

Mahouka Koukou no Rettousei
Master Clans Conference Chapter (I)

Satou Tsutomu

Illustrations by Ishida Kana

ASCII Media Works / Dengeki Bunko • Tokyo, Japan

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Ishida Kana] — digital ed.

ISBN: 978-4-04-865313-8

Summary: The story follows Tatsuya Shiba, a bodyguard to his sister Miyuki Shiba who is also a candidate to succeed the master clan, Yotsuba. They enroll into First High School which segregates its students based on their magical abilities. Miyuki is enlisted as a first course student and is viewed as one of the best students, while Tatsuya is in the second course and considered to be magically inept. However, Tatsuya's technical knowledge, combat abilities, and unique magic techniques causes people to view him as an irregular to the school's standardized rankings.

[1. Romance-Magic—Fiction. 2. Magic-Engineer—Fiction. 3. School—Fiction.] I. Title. II. Series: Tsutomu, Satou. Mahouka Koukou no Rettousei.

ePub by Roah Nosh. Visit the “[Oniisama](#)” page for details.



<http://polyaness.com>

Translation by [oniisama-TL](#).

[Leader (Recruitment, PR): M.R *Editors: C K A M N W S (MIA) N Anon*
Proofreader: L Y *Translation checkers: D M W K K A* Translators: Y T R]

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design / BEE-PEE

魔法科高校の
劣等生 17

The irregular
at magic high school

師族会議編(上)

葉山

はやま



四葉家の使用人

葉山 序列第一位

筆頭執事として全てを監督する

花菱 序列第二位

主に荒事面を管理する

紅林 序列第三位

調整施設を統括する

ここまでがインナー
これ以下はアウトター

青木 序列第四位

財務面を統括する

黒田 序列第五位

外部の人材採用・スカウト、村外の不動産管理

白川 序列第六位

葉山の補佐。夫人はメイド長

木村 序列第七位

村長代行、村内の不動産管理

小原 序列第八位

交通機動隊上がりで、外部との交通手段を管理



「お兄様、お母様はもうお帰りなさいましたか？」
深雪が自分の隣の席を勧める。

「弁当を用意してくれていたのか」

「はい、今日が必要になると思いましたので」

「そうか。ありがとう、深雪」

深雪は上機嫌だ。二人きりのランチが嬉しいのだろう。

「とにかくまずは、食べさせてくれ」

「ええ、どうぞ」

「何でしたら、食べさせて差し上げても良いですよ」

膝の上の弁当箱を落とさないようバランスを取りながら身体を捻り、

達也のおかずから揚げ物を自分の箸でつまみ上げる。

そして達也の口元へ持つていった。

「いただきます」

達也は慌てずその言葉を、

自分の首を動かして揚げ物を深雪の箸に触れながら噛み食った。

深雪の顔が見える見る赤らむ。

彼女は慌てて座り直し、膝の上に目を向け自分の弁当箱を開いた。

そうすることで、達也から目を逸らした。

司波深雪

しはふかゆき

達也の妹。第一高校2年A組所属。生徒会会長を務める優等生。冷却魔法が得意。兄を溺愛する『重度のブラコン』。

司波達也

しはふたつや

司波兄妹の兄。第一高校2年E組所属。生徒会書記(長)。妹である深雪を『ガーディアン』として守るべき存在だと認識していること以外、全てに達観している。

※北海道と小笠原方面、沖縄方面は国防軍所属の魔法師の
編制が強く、十師族の管轄外となっている。

《十師族會議メンバー



一条剛毅

石川梨金沢在住。四十二歳。表の職業は海洋資源開発公社社長。一家は二人戦闘を想定した生体干渉する魔法を開発研究する魔法技能開発第三研究所から生まれた。北陸山陰地方を監視、守護している。



一木舞衣

兵庫県芦屋に住む。五十五歳。
表の職業は複数の化学工業、食品工業会社の太株主。
二本家は、第一研と対をなす「無機物に干渉する魔法」を
開発研究する魔法技能師開発第三研究所から生まれた。
阪神・中国地方を監視守護している。



三矢元

神奈川県厚木市在住。五十三歳。表の職業（ト）「えるか」とうかは微妙なところだが、国際的な小型兵器ブローカー。三矢家は、「魔法同時発動の最大化」を研究する魔法技能師開発第三研究所から生まれた。今も稼働する第三研の運用を担当している。



四葉真夜

四葉家は、精神干渉魔法を開発研究する魔法技能師開発第四研究所から生まれた。東海および岐阜長野方面を監視守護している。



五輪勇海

愛媛県宇和島在住。四十九歳。
表の職業は海運会社の重役で実質オーナー。
五輪家は、物質の形状に干渉する魔法を開発研究する
魔法技術開発第五研究所から生まれた。
四国地方を監視・守護している。



六塚温子

宮城県仙台在住。二十九歳。
表の職業は地熱発電所掘削会社の実質オーナー。
六塚家は「魔法による熱量制御」を研究する
魔法技能師開発第六研究所から生まれた。
東北地方を監視・守護している。



七草弘一

東京都在住。四十八歳。
表の職業はペンチャイキビタル経営。
七草家は第三研究所から対集戦闘を念頭に置いた魔法を
開発研究する魔法技術師開発第七研究所に移ったのちに生まれた
文字家と共に伊豆を含む関東地方を監視・守護している。



八代雷蔵

福岡県在住。三十二歳。
表の職業は大学の講師で、複数の通信会社の大株主。
八代家は、魔法による重力、電磁力、強い相互作用、弱い相互作用の
操作を研究する魔法技術師開業第八研究所から生まれた。
沖繩を除く九州地方を監視・守護している。



九島真言

奈良県生駒在住。六十四歳。
表の職業は様々な軍需産業会社の株主・出資者・価値権者。
九鳥家は、現代魔法と占式魔法の融合などを研究する
魔法技能師開究第九研究所から生まれた。
京都・奈良・滋賀・紀伊方面を監視・守護している。



十字和樹

東京都在住。四十四歳。
表の職業は国防軍を得意先とする土木建設会社のオーナー。文字の家は、防衛のために、空間に仮装構造物を生成する領域魔法を開発研究する魔法技術師兼究第十研究所から生まれた。七草家と共に伊豆を含む関東地方を監視、守護している。

ある欠陥を抱える劣等生の兄。
全てが完全無欠な優等生の妹。
二人の兄妹が魔法科高校に入学した時から、
波乱の日々の幕が開いた――。



魔法科高校の17
劣等生
The irregular
at magic high school
師族会議編(上)

佐島 勤

Tsutomu Sato

illustration

石田可奈

Kana Ishida

Chapter 1

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January 2nd, 2097 A.D., the news that had spread from the Magic Association early into the New Year had produced a big shock among related parties.

The person who made such an announcement was one of the Family Heads of the Ten Master Clans, Yotsuba Maya, from the Yotsuba Family.

The included contents were the chosen heiress of the Yotsuba Family, as well as the engagement of the next Family Head.

It meant that the Yotsuba Family was moving forward to the next generation. Shiba Miyuki was named as the next Family Head of the Yotsuba, and unexpectedly, Shiba Tatsuya was also chosen as her fiancé. Both pieces of news became a major announcement for the next era of Japan's Magic Community.

However, this news didn't just place expectations on the "New Era".

Anxiety and shock rippled through those who knew about Tatsuya and Miyuki. Leaving out the fact they were both related to the Yotsuba Family (in some way) which they had hidden up until now, it was revealed they were also not real siblings. The emotional rivalry among the girls and boys had, perhaps, seen this as a "bolt from the blue", which was a natural outcome with the events as they were.

Among those to be jarred from this was the Ichijou Family's eldest son from the Ten Master Clans, Ichijou Masaki.



January 2nd, 4 P.M., Masaki came back from the New Year's Ritual and went to his father's parlor after being summoned.

It was rare for Masaki's father to be around the house at this time. He was usually moving around the seabed looking for resources for his mining company, as that was the official family business. Otherwise he would be overseeing the training of Magicians under the Ichijou Family, hence he wouldn't return home before dinner. However, during the first three days of the New Year, he had to receive greetings as the Head of the Ichijou Family of the Ten Master Clans. For better or worse, his obligation as a Family Head required him to stay put in the house.

The Ichijou Family's Mansion has a Western-style partitioned structure, and the room to greet the guests was located at the end of a long hallway attached to a parlor which was designed according to Japanese-style architecture, like a Samurai-styled mansion.

Masaki arrived in front of his father's parlor, and knelt down in the hallway before knocking on the door rather than suddenly barging into the room.

"It's me, Masaki."

"Come in."

He received a rough response from the other side of the sliding door.

The voice was unlike Masaki's who had the tone of a young nobleman, but it was not an uncouth voice. Rather, it had a wild vibe to it that you could feel in your belly regardless of the

volume.

“Excuse me.”

He opened the sliding door while kneeling down, and soon after entering the room, he knelt down again. It might appear as excess politeness between parent and child, but it suits the good behavior and sensibility of Masaki.

On the other hand, his father, Gouki, who was wearing a haori hakama with the family crest hanging on his chest, broke his posture by attaching his elbow to his foot. He looked like a “Lord” in a popular drama which was set in the late Showa Era, but Gouki was spared from scrutiny for his rough attitude.

Masaki sat in front of his father. They didn’t resemble each other well for a parent and child. The Ichijou Family’s son and daughters take after their mother, and that was a widely known fact.

Gouki was 42 years old this year, and if he was to be described in one word, it would be “manly”. His whole body was overly tanned, and on his head was short and cropped hair, all acquired due to the long time he spent under intense sunlight. His appearance suited his dignity quite appropriately for his age. In contrast, his body did not appear to age as much, his muscles were firm, albeit not voluminous, but toned and edgy.

Despite his harsh features, he left a strong yet tasteful impression.

“Well, don’t be so uptight.”

That was the first sentence he offered to his son, who was sitting with an upright attitude from the very beginning.

“Then, I won’t hold back.”

He was dressed up throughout the New Year— —with his student uniform— —so Masaki followed his father’s

recommendation and relaxed his posture. Gouki did not like formal manners, but he still exercised some degree of distinction. Whoever it may be it, as a member of the Ten Master Clans, or as the Ichijou Family Head, any human being must exercise the appropriate behavior. Now, as soon as he asked his son to “not be uptight”, he was acting as Masaki’s father, instead of the Head of the Ichijou Family.

“Masaki. It’ll be hard to answer this question honestly to your parent when you’re at this age, but please make your best effort.”

“What happened? Is it something serious?”

It was unusual for Gouki to give such a prelude. He was usually a cut-to-the-chase, blunt-to-a-fault kind of person. Especially towards his own son. Masaki was naturally mystified.

However, Masaki also decided to go along with him, since he was already there.

“You really need to answer honestly. Do you know a girl named Shiba Miyuki?”

“Wh-why are you asking such a thing!?”

Masaki spoke in a panicky voice, which indicated that he had a positive answer to the question given.

“Do you, Masaki?”

However, Gouki wanted a clearly worded answer, so he asked Masaki again straightforwardly.

“...I know her.”

He still didn’t know what his father was thinking. After being persistently asked, Masaki decided to answer obediently.

“When and how did you meet her?”

Masaki almost shouted “Why do I need to answer a question like this for my father?”. Although he had it on the tip of his

tongue, Masaki held back, realizing the act would be meaningless. His father may have an assertive personality, but he wouldn't say something like that without reason.

“At the Nine Schools Competition, two years ago. I've known her since the Opening Ceremony. I got to know her during the Celebration Party when I got to be her dance partner.”

“So you had an eye on her first. Since she didn't reject your offer to dance, at the very least you weren't disliked by her.”

He didn't have enough information from just that, and his frank guess of the situation made Masaki's face grow hotter. However, this was still just testing the waters.

“Then, do you like Miyuki-jou?”

In the following instance, an intense stare emitted from Gouki, and Masaki seemed to skip a heartbeat.

“Wha-what are you talking a — —!?”

“I asked you, are you in love with her?”

“Why do you need to ask me such a question!?”

His tongue was tied due to his agitation, so Masaki's speech didn't come out well and was similar to a scream. This time, he was unable to suppress his feelings.

“Approximately 30 minutes ago, I received a message from the Yotsuba via the Magic Association.”

Gouki answered his son's question with a grave tone. He would never, ever, tease his son about love, and neither would he ridicule him.

“From the Yotsuba?”

He immediately told Masaki about it. The word “Yotsuba” which came out of Gouki's mouth made Masaki disrupt his cool consciously.

“What business does the Yotsuba have with the Ichijou?”

“It’s not only between the Family Heads. The Yotsuba Family announced to the Ten Master Clans, the 18 Assistant Houses, as well as the Hundred Families. It is some sort of a greeting towards the major houses of Japan’s Magic Community.”

“Greeting? How amusing, for that unfriendly Yotsuba Family to do such a thing... What exactly is happening that would make them send such a greeting?”

Masaki and Gouki stared into each other’s eyes for a while. Masaki made sure that there were no lies in the information that his father was about to deliver, and he confirmed that Gouki was prepared to tell Masaki the truth.

“The Yotsuba Family has named their next Family Head. She is a First High sophomore student, Shiba Miyuki.”

“Shiba-san is, from the Yotsuba, the next Head...?”

Despite keeping his polite tone, Masaki was deeply shaken. The fact that Miyuki was a Member of the Yotsuba Family, on top of the fact she was of a close lineage that would be appointed as the next Family Head. A fact that he’d never dreamt to hear rocked Masaki’s heart hard.

Gouki kept his strong gaze upon Masaki while continuing to retell the story upon Masaki’s drifting consciousness.

Soon after, a bigger bomb was dropped on Masaki.

“Masaki, the Yotsuba named Shiba Miyuki as the next Family Head. Additionally, it was announced that Shiba Miyuki is engaged to her cousin, Shiba Tatsuya.”

“Shiba-san is engaged...?”

Masaki was stunned in surprise. However, he only needed a short time to realize the details of the fact.

“Cousin, you said? Shiba-san and Shiba Tatsuya are supposed to be siblings!”

Gouki nodded lightly to his son's words.

“I have also confirmed about that fact. Certainly, they were supposed to be siblings up to now. However, the truth seems to point out that they are cousins.”

“Seems?”

Despite his overflowing upsetness, his father's words were still a problem. He recognized an unnatural part.

“Shiba Tatsuya is Yotsuba Maya's son who was born via artificial insemination from her egg. Please read carefully, his family registry data was modified at the end of last year.”

Gouki was also displeased about this fact.

“Certainly, it is a plausible tale. At the very least, there is no evidence that Yotsuba-dono did not tell a lie. However, there is no evidence that what Yotsuba-dono said is the truth either.”

“Dad, do you think... that the Yotsuba are lying?”

Masaki's voice came out sounding like he was almost sniveling.

“That's not the main problem right now.”

However, Gouki shook off his son's accusation.

“Whether they are siblings or cousins, it's still no good for close relatives to marry each other. The genes of Magicians in this country are at stake. Marriage between close relatives might compromise their genes, so it must be avoided. It's a natural responsibility of the Ten Master Clans towards the nation.”

Masaki changed his legs' positioning, and broke his posture unconsciously.

“This was a one-sided decision by the Yotsuba Family. Even so, they can't ignore that the possibility exists. That's why I asked

you. Masaki, do you like Shiba Miyuki-jou? Are you in love with her?”

Gouki stared hard at Masaki. He has strong eyes, which might even stay open without blinking even in the midst of a raging ocean. However, Masaki had no reason to be afraid of them.

“Yeah. I’m in love with Shiba-san. It was love at first sight.”

Masaki had no reason to feel guilty about his feelings.

“I see.”

Gouki nodded in satisfaction after eliciting a confession from his son.

“Then, as a parent, I should assist with realizing your feelings. Oh, don’t worry. The Ichijou Family can still be inherited by Akane. You are free to go as the son-in-law without refrain.”

“Dad?”

Masaki was confident that his love for Miyuki was earnest. He was convinced his feelings were real.

“First of all, we must force the current engagement to stop. To do so, shall we express the wish from our side now?”

“Wait a minute, Dad!”

However, for his parent to convey his feelings before he had any chance to say it by himself simply felt wrong to Masaki.

“There’s no time to wait. The other party has announced to the world that they have been engaged.”

However, after seeing the “don’t be a loser” look in his father’s eyes, Masaki was unable to say anything to his father’s unreasonable argument.



January 3rd. The previous day, the Yotsuba Family sent an

engagement announcement to the main Magic Families of Japan, and the Ichijou Family made an objection via the Magic Association.

Yet, the one who felt the most intrigued was not the Yotsuba Family, but rather the Head of Saegusa Family, Saegusa Kouichi.

Ichijou Gouki sent a written rejection to the Magic Association as displayed on the electronic paper, and Kouichi read it with a thin smile.

(You're bold as usual...)

Kouichi and Gouki have been old friends since they were young.

Although they didn't have a very close relationship, they didn't particularly hate each other, either. Since they have completely different personalities from the other, it was natural for them to be distant. They were more suited to be called acquaintances.

Furthermore, the age gap between them was adding to the reason that the relationship between them didn't turn hostile. Kouichi was six years older than Gouki. When they first met, Kouichi was a university student while Gouki was still a middle school student. Perhaps, that was the reason why Kouichi couldn't shake off the image that Gouki was "a time consuming naughty little brother", and did not feel any hostility towards him. Even with this objection, Kouichi felt like saying "You're doing another reckless thing again".

(One wrong step and the Ichijou Family will be exposed to crossfire criticisms.)

The Ten Master Clans was set to be of equal allies to each other, and not in any position that could interfere with the internal situations of the other families. There is likely to be damage to valuable genes due to close-relative marriages, so regardless of the justification, it was not allowed to deny the

engagement of other families.

However, if the situation affected himself, then it was a different story altogether.

This time, the ones who opposed this engagement of the Yotsuba's next Family Head was not just the Family Head of the Ichijou Family.

Together with his opposition of the engagement between cousins who have monozygotic twin mothers, he also proposed to engage the eldest son of the Ichijou Family, Ichijou Masaki, to the Yotsuba's next Family Head, Shiba Miyuki.

Proposing an engagement to a party who had already decided on a fiancé would normally be seen as a hint towards illicit love. However, in this case, the main underlying reason was to avoid the risk of impairing the genes of excellent Magicians.

The fact that the Ichijou Family was interfering with the Yotsuba Family's next Family Head due to Gouki's support of his son's love was unknown to Kouichi. It would impossible for Kouichi to come out with such a gamble for the love of his children, but the Gouki he knew of from the past would be able to do so.

(However, it doesn't really matter with this kind of timing.)

The fact that Shiba Miyuki was going to be named as the next Head of the Yotsuba Family, and that Shiba Tatsuya would be chosen as her fiancé were already deduced by Kouichi.

Despite being a freshman, Shiba Miyuki had mastered high-end magics like "Inferno" and "Niflheim", and she also exercised an unknown deadly magic during the Yokohama Disturbance. The range of that magic and the effect of which were unknown as an interpersonal magic, but its power was comparable to the "Meteor Shower" from what the Saegusa Family Researchers have predicted.

Then, Shiba Tatsuya, who holds the strongest counter-magic and unidentified Decomposition Magic as well as a miraculous kind of magic. Kouichi also received a report that Tatsuya was likely to be the Strategic-Class Magician who caused the “Scorched Halloween” incident. Moreover, he was closely related with the JSDF 101st Battalion, which was said to be the world’s first Flight Combat Independent Magic Battalion.

Kouichi also knew beforehand that the two were related to the Yotsuba.

Although he didn’t know that Shiba Tatsuya was Maya’s son, he only knew that there was no concrete evidence that Shiba Miyuki was a daughter of Miya. When these two individuals become the center of the Yotsuba Family, the other 27 Houses constituting the Ten Master Clans— 18 Assistant Houses might become useless in terms of suppressing the Yotsuba Family, even as a group. It was not known to Kouichi, but Kudou Retsu had similar fears.

Regarding the appointment of Shiba Miyuki as the next Head of the Yotsuba Family and that Shiba Tatsuya was chosen as her fiancé, Kouichi was responding impatiently to this news. He thought that Tatsuya and Miyuki were siblings (although they are siblings), and if one of them were to leave the Yotsuba Family, perhaps it would be Tatsuya. Although it wouldn’t be enough to completely weaken the Yotsuba Family, Kouichi thought that it would keep the domestic power balance of persuasion power over time. — —Of course, it also meant that he would set a trap to get that persuasion power.

That was why when Maya announced that Shiba Tatsuya was not Shiba Miyuki’s brother, and that the both of them were engaged, Kouichi was taken aback by his complete miscalculation. It didn’t matter whether they were real siblings or not since he couldn’t extort such a precise inspection of them,

since published news is the truth. If they do get married in the future, Shiba Tatsuya would become an unwavering pillar of the Yotsuba, together with Shiba Miyuki. Kouichi was afraid of the time when that reality would be realized.

When that happened, there wouldn't be any more ways of stopping them. The fact that they already sent out an announcement through the Magic Association regarding the formal engagement meant that they could no longer be stopped. Kouichi was chewing bitterly, but — —

(There is still that method, huh.)

Although Gouki's reaction was rude, it was not reckless. He knew that Gouki had calculated at least that much. Yet, given Gouki's nature, Kouichi concluded that the greater possibility was that Gouki did it based on his intuition rather than thinking it through.

However, there was no doubt it was a valid move.

Kouichi immediately called his daughters to the living room.

Kouichi was wearing a suit while his daughters gathered wearing glamorous, long-sleeved kimonos. Although they were not wearing the furisode willingly, the three of them nevertheless wore the clothes. It wasn't due to their parent's preference either. Such a factor wasn't nonexistent, but their getups were primarily done to entertain the visitors.

While the eldest son of the Saegusa Family had the role of entertaining the guests, the three daughters had the role of guiding guests. On a side note, Mayumi's mother was estranged with pretext of medical treatment.

"Otouto-sama, what's the matter?"

Mayumi suddenly asked Kouichi who sat across from her.

Although she was dressed up in a furisode every year during this time, she was not so amiable this year despite the kimono that she put on.

“I haven’t told you about this, but yesterday I received an announcement from the Magic Association, from the Yotsuba Family to the Ten Master Clans, the 18 Assistant Houses, and the Hundred Families.”

“Not only the 28 Houses, but the Hundred Families as well? Was it such an important announcement?”

With Kouichi’s suggestive words, Izumi did not show any tense response in contrast to her sister, and showed up as per her father’s order.

Looking at Izumi who got quite interested in the topic despite her reluctance to listen to her father’s story, Kouichi nodded with satisfaction. His youngest twin daughters were cute, even Izumi when viewed from an adult’s point of view, and seemed to sweeten Kouichi as well.

“It is important. To the Yotsuba Family, and to you all as well.”

“To us as well?”

Mayumi raised her question with a louder voice. Kouichi paid no heed to her.

“The Yotsuba Family’s next Family Head is named to be First High Student, Shiba Miyuki-jou.”

“Ehh!?”

The one who raised her voice was Mayumi. Izumi, on the other hand, widened her eyes while holding both of her hands tightly. Kasumi remained relatively calm, although she had a hard time believing the news so suddenly.

Mayumi, who had the closest relationship with the Shiba siblings in her family, originally had the notion that Tatsuya was

from a Family as an “Extra with the Number Four” at best. However, the three of them never imagined in their wildest dreams that Miyuki was a Member of the Yotsuba Family.

“Also, it was announced that Shiba Miyuki-jou is engaged to a student from First High, Shiba Tatsuya-kun.”

“Huh!?”

“It can’t be!”

“Even if they’re from the Yotsuba Family, siblings still can’t marry each other, right?”

Izumi remained speechless, while Mayumi started to sound like she was screaming, before Kasumi asked her to remain calm.

“They are actually cousins.”

“Cousins?”

Kasumi was not as upset as her sisters due to her calm personality, but she had little fondness for Tatsuya and Miyuki. Kouichi, who understood his daughters’ temperaments, was able to understand this.

Kouichi also knew that Izumi is attracted to Miyuki’s beauty.

That was why the point of Kouichi’s interest was Mayumi’s violent upsetness.

“Shiba Miyuki-jou’s mother is Yotsuba Miya-san. Shiba Tatsuya-kun is the son of the current Family Head, of Yotsuba Maya-san who was born from a frozen egg cell of hers.”

“Tatsuya-kun is... the son of the Yotsuba Family’s Head?”

Kasumi decided to focus her sight downward rather than to watch her sister stunned. The twin sisters seemed to have decided to leave them alone for the mean time since they had nothing to say as well.

“On the contrary,”

However, the sharp tone in Kouichi's voice continued, and Kasumi was aware of the voice of her father.

“The Ichijou Family's Head, Ichijou Gouki-dono, has challenged the engagement of the two from the Yotsuba Family through the Magic Association.”

“The Ichijou Family has?”

Mayumi made a confused face after listening to her father.

“That's right. He didn't only go against the engagement, but he also proposed the engagement between his eldest son, Masaki-kun, and Miyuki-jou to Maya-dono.”

“Is that so?”

Mayumi seemed to have overcome her upsetness. She tried to mull over some behind-the-scene speculation of the engagement of the eldest son of the Ichijou Family and the Yotsuba Family's next Family Head.

“Mayumi, has some idea come to mind?”

There was no evidence seen that Mayumi was shocked to the unexpected “new facts” about Tatsuya and Miyuki anymore. Her speed of regaining her composure was evaluated as an advantage for Kouichi.

Rather than taking an interest in what Mayumi knew, Kouichi asked the question to get her comments on the matter, as he wanted to know what she was thinking since she was able to regain her composure in such a short amount of time.

“No, it's nothing important. I was simply reminded that Ichijou Masaki-kun has a strong favor towards Miyuki-san.”

“I see. Mayumi, I wonder, when did you notice that?”

“The Nine Schools Competition from two years ago, during the after party. I am pretty sure I'm not the only one who has noticed

this.”

However, unexpectedly, the content of what she said was helpful for Kouichi. Apparently, the motive of the Ichijou Family Head seems to be helping the romance of his son.

“I see. Hence, rather than acting from the political arena, he chose to consider his son’s feelings.”

Kouichi couldn’t consider the same thing as Gouki. He would never take any action that would disadvantage the Saegusa Family for the sake of his daughter’s love. However, he understood the principle behind Gouki’s actions well, more than his daughters.

“By the way, how do you see Shiba Tatsuya-kun? Mayumi, what do you think about him?”

Being questioned by Kouichi, Mayumi’s eyes began to show a hint of anxiety.

“Even if you ask me... I think he’s an excellent junior.”

Kouichi did not miss the fact that his daughter was slightly blushing when Mayumi tried to answer him blandly.

“How about you, Kasumi?”

“I have very little contact with Shiba-senpai so my knowledge is only on the surface. I only know that he is someone who excels greatly in Magic Engineering.”

Kasumi said so in a vague manner, before she turned her eyes to Izumi.

“I think Izumi knows better than I, since she’s working with him in the Student Council.”

“I see.”

Kouichi moved his eyes towards Izumi.

“Izumi, what do you think of Shiba Tatsuya-kun?”

Izumi changed her hollow eyes instantly when her name was called. She understood what the question was about, so she was not pretending to answer seriously, but had a naturally firm countenance.

“...I think Shiba-senpai... is someone who can't be measured by normal standards.”

“Really.”

The one who showed a hint of surprise was not only Kouichi. Kasumi revealed her surprised look to Izumi, while Mayumi turned her body to Izumi with rounded eyes.

Without flinching from the attention she brought on herself, Izumi continued her words and returned a straight gaze to Kouichi's face.

“I believe you remember that the First High conducted a Stellar Furnace experiment last April.”

“Ah, if I remember correctly, Shiba Tatsuya-kun was the one who had the initiative to do so.”

It was an event which overturned Kouichi's plan to damage the Yotsuba's reputation in the public's eyes. He wouldn't easily forget it.

“At the last Nine Schools Competition, Shiba-senpai contributed greatly as a member of the Technical Staff. Even during the previous year's Nine Schools Competition, Shiba-senpai also introduced Flight Magic which had just been published just before the Nine Schools Competition had started for the Mirage Bat event.

Kouichi also knew about this, but he directed his sight to Mayumi for confirmation.

“It's true. He did implement the Flight Magic to the specified CAD. He also developed a new magic which has been recorded

in the Magic Index.”

“This year, he was selected to improve high level magics such as Invisible Bullet and Phonon Maser.”

Mayumi further added to Izumi’s testimonies.

“That’s something else.”

What his daughter said were all known to him, yet he looked naturally surprised, as if he was hearing this for the first time.

“However, what I find unfathomable about Shiba-senpai, is that on the surface he doesn’t appear to see any of his actions as achievements.”

Izumi did not end her comment there.

“Shiba-senpai... and us, are seeing a different world... While he lives here, he’s fundamentally living in a different world... Sometimes, I get this kind of feeling.”

“Is that because he has a similar special vision like Mayumi?”

“...I don’t know. Sorry, Otou-sama, it’s just a vague feeling.”

Izumi looked down as she was not able to explain her feelings properly.

Kouichi stared at Mayumi.

Mayumi also shook her head, hinting that she had no idea.

Although Izumi’s impression of Tatsuya had piqued Kouichi’s interest, she missed a fact in her conclusion. Kouichi decided to temporarily shelve his curiosity.

“Then, what do you think of him as the opposite sex?”

Izumi turned her face up due to the unexpected question, while opening her eyes wide due to the surprise.

“He’s not someone that I could lay my hands on! ...It’s regrettable, truly regrettable.”

“Izumi, what do you mean?”

Suddenly, Izumi’s calm and collected appearance crumbled down, Kouichi looked rather anxious than worried at this sight.

“From my point of view, Shiba-senpai seems to be very manipulative... Even if he’s rather suitable for Miyuki-senpai, still...”

“Izumi, do you know what you are trying to say? Even for me, this is quite a surprise you know?”

It seemed like Kasumi had forgotten that her father was watching her, she involuntarily turned to Izumi with a surprised face.

With an uncomfortable face, Kouichi cleared his throat.

Kasumi and Izumi shivered as if shocked by electricity, and aligned their downcast heads shyly.

“Mayumi, how about you? How do you think of Shiba Tatsuya-kun as a member of the opposite sex?”

Kouichi went about without scolding Kasumi and Izumi— who were now, hesitant to continue their comments— then proceeded with Mayumi.

“Even if you ask me...”

Even though it was expected that she would be asked this, Mayumi’s eyes wandered around in a panic. However, despite her nervousness, there wasn’t a hint of dislike to be seen.

There wasn’t even a tinge of a troubled expression either.

“Shiba Tatsuya-kun is two years younger than Mayumi, but that much shouldn’t cause any significant problems. Especially considering his position as the son of the current Head of the Yotsuba Family, the age gap is balanced out.”

“About that, he has a very mature air around him...”

If everything fell in place neatly as Kouichi planned, this might go well.

Aligned with Gouki's pace, he might be able to destroy Maya's plan.

"Mayumi, if you have such feelings, you should officially date him."

Kouichi told her so with respect to his plan,

"I disagree!"

Kasumi raised her objection.

"Kasumi, restrain yourself."

Not only did she disturb him in an untimely manner, it was also a behavior unsuitable for a high school student. This time, Kouichi reprimanded her instantly.

"...I'm terribly sorry."

Kasumi was also aware that her attitude was inappropriate. Although she was unhappy, she did not rebel against her father.

"Otou-sama, if Onee-sama has such feelings for Shiba-senpai, I would suggest for her to have a proper relationship with him, but I'm also against this."

"Izumi. Do you have any reason?"

Kouichi, though serious in dealing with Kasumi, did not intend on immediately reprimanding Izumi but instead wanted her to continue.

Although Izumi's polite manner of speaking was part of the reason, the main reason was Kouichi doted on Izumi more.

"For a female to actively approach a male who has already formally announced his engagement to the public, if news got out of this, it would be absolutely unacceptable. The Ichijou Family can only do what they're doing because Ichijou-san is a male.

Shiba-senpai is a male so he can just laugh it off if his love gets snatched away, but for Miyuki-senpai, it would very likely hurt her.”

“...Is that so?”

When it came to such unique female sensibilities, even Kouichi could not refute them. In fact, just asking such a thing already pushed him to his limit.

“Yes!”

The one who exclaimed thus was Mayumi.

“To ask a guy who has just announced his engagement, if word got out it, that would be unacceptable. Not to mention I’m older than him. I don’t want to spread rumors that I’m a senpai who tempts her kouhai or that I’m lacking in morals.”

“Is that so.”

Kouichi could only leave things in such a disadvantaged position.

Henceforth, Kouichi never again brought up the issue of the Yotsuba Family announcement of the engagement. From this point out, he had to fully focus on matters concerning Miyuki and Tatsuya since they were now known to be from the Yotsuba Family. Kouichi dismissed his daughters after that.



After 8 P.M. in the evening, visitors to the Saegusa household had all but left. There were no more prior engagements to any dinner banquets before tomorrow. Kouichi and his daughters, changed out of their kimonos into normal clothes, and he finished dinner before settling himself in his study.

This did not differ much from his normal routine. Although having dinner with his daughters was a rare sight, retiring back to his study after dinner was a perfectly normal occurrence. After

completing the work required of him as a Head of the Ten Master Clans and that of a businessman, as well as reading the reports of clandestine operations, the call that Kouichi had been waiting for finally arrived.

[New Year's greetings, Saegusa-dono.]

“Happy New Year, Ichijou-dono. Apologies for having you specially make this call.”

Ichijou Gouki was precisely the person Kouichi was waiting for.

[No, I'm the one who made you wait, sorry.]

“I didn't have to wait long at all.”

It was two hours ago when Kouichi sent his request for Gouki to give him a call when Gouki was free. Hence, to say that he didn't have too long to wait really was too subtle.

[Then, what you wanted to discuss, is it about the Yotsuba Family?]

Although, in terms of age, Kouichi was older than Gouki by seven years, the one speaking to the other in familiar terms was Gouki. However, there was an unwritten rule when it came to the Heads of the Ten Master Clans owing to their equal standings and it was Kouichi's attention to formal speech that was inappropriate.

Kouichi was probably the only one from the Ten Master Clans who was such a stickler for those kinds of details.

“Yes, but to be accurate it's about the request Ichijou-dono made of the Yotsuba Family, specifically about your son.”

While Kouichi said so with a smile, Gouki started frowning.

[Please, don't pretend as if you know everything, will you?]

As Gouki's response was within his calculations, Kouichi replied unhurriedly.

“I am considering supporting your son’s pursuit of love.”

Perhaps complaints about Gouki’s highly unreasonable act had already started to show. To move the conversation forward, Kouichi clearly stated his intentions before Gouki got annoyed.

[Is that so. Thanks.]

Gouki thanked Kouichi while trying to guess at his true intentions, causing Gouki to reveal a weird expression.

“I, too, am saddened by the engagement announced by Yotsuba-dono.”

Gouki’s expression changed from one of surprise to agreement.

Compared to feeling sorry for his own son, objecting to the next Head of Yotsuba Family’s engagement was a more palatable excuse.

[Then, I’ll assume Saegusa-dono feels that the marriage between two close relatives that the Yotsuba Family is proposing is too dangerous?]

“Yes, exactly. I also frequently hear of the next Head of the Yotsuba Family, Shiba Miyuki-jou’s outstanding qualities from my daughters.”

This was a lie. Kouichi and his daughters didn’t even hold conversations “frequently”. Intel on Miyuki and Tatsuya had been entirely obtained through private investigations.

If he was honest about it, however, the question of how Kouichi knew about Miyuki and Tatsuya despite the Yotsuba Family covering up the two’s relationship would arise. Whether or not Kouichi had been secretly conducting investigations would also rise into suspicion, so it was more convenient to simply say he had heard it from his daughters.

“It’s impossible to overlook the possibility of her talents not being passed on after all.”

Kouichi's words were meant to echo Gouki's intentions. Unexpectedly however, Gouki bit his lips unhappily, which was outside of Kouichi's calculations.

[— —Not only Miyuki-jou, Shiba Tatsuya-kun, too, is a Magician who has achieved victory over my son. Although I might sound like an idiot for saying so, but I think those that win over Masaki are pretty valuable.]

“Yes. It is as you say.”

Kouichi immediately corrected his stance. Though Gouki might think himself stupid just now, winning over Masaki was definitely a huge accomplishment. In actuality, when the Third High team led by Masaki lost to the First High team led by Tatsuya in the 2095 Nine Schools Competition, the shock was so great that the Magic Association almost convened an online meeting via its direct line to discuss their response.

“Shiba Tatsuya-kun's abilities must be treasured as well.”

Kouichi's was not merely paying lip service with his immediate agreement with Gouki's words.

[Then, Saegusa-dono, what do you want to do? Is it to plead with Yotsuba-dono to dissolve their plans for marriage, or to support my son?]

Although Kouichi appeared to support him on the surface, Gouki revealed an unhappy face, obviously suspecting that Kouichi was trying to make use of his son.

That was beyond Kouichi's calculations, or rather perhaps, it was even within his calculations.

“In truth, I am considering having Shiba Tatsuya-kun become my son-in-law.”

Here, Kouichi had revealed that he was acting humble while bowing down his head.

Gouki couldn't help but waver for having arrived at the same conclusion as Kouichi.

[...Isn't your Mayumi-jou currently dating the young son of the Itsuwa Family?]

Gouki probed Kouichi with expression and tone speaking of his inability to hide his surprise.

“Yes, putting aside the lack of progress between Mayumi and Hirofumi, the two do not seem to intend on continuing the relationship, to the extent that they might be going back to square one.”

[If it's Shiba Tatsuya-kun, are you saying that Mayumi-jou thinks that way too?]

“For Mayumi, Shiba Tatsuya-kun is also a Kouhai, but for her to feel that way should not be a surprise. Mayumi is already twenty now, and as a father, she is approaching the age when I wish she would start making plans for marriage.”

Gouki's intuition was telling him that Kouichi wanted to make use of the Ichijou Family, but his level of understanding failed to allow himself to understand this. Kouichi's words contained absolutely nothing to arouse anything suspicious, and it helped that he was approaching Gouki at this point in time.

“I'm embarrassed to say this but I'm still at the stage where I'm negotiating with my daughter, and still not at the stage when I can propose a marriage. Hence, in place of a proposal I'm hoping I could add my name to your voice of dissent.”

Gouki felt that he was slowly slipping into an ingenious trap.

[Then as the Family Head, it's something I should feel grateful for.]

However, he was now only considering whether to accept Kouichi's proposal.

[If you could give me a reply as soon as possible, I would be very grateful. As a Family Head, I plan to contact others who also consider Yotsuba-dono's plan dangerous, what do you think?]

“If such people really exist, please do introduce them to me.”

It wasn't really a request made of Kouichi, but rather Gouki trying his best to maintain his position as the main party involved. However, in the current state of affairs it was all Gouki could do.

[Oh, of course.]

Kouichi while smiling, nodded. Gouki understood from the start that to see through Kouichi's real thoughts on the phone was impossible, so he gave up.

[Then, I'll send you the original document sent to the Magic Association later.]

“In case of any errors I'll send the co-signed document back to you first, so please do a thorough check.”

[Understood.]

“That's concluded, then. Ichijou-dono, thank you very much.”

[No, I should be the one feeling thankful. I'll take my leave now.]

The conversation with Gouki over the phone ended satisfactorily for Kouichi.



As Tatsuya and Miyuki brought Minami home, it was already Friday, January 4th.

Those who knew of Tatsuya and company's relationship with the Yotsuba Family were only limited to those at the top of the magical community. However, it would not take more than a few

days for this intelligence to proliferate through the people connected to magic. The existence of the location of their house, too, was only a matter of time.

Hayama had mentioned of preparations being made in Tokyo for a second Yotsuba Family Residence; Tatsuya mused that considerations will have to be made about a possible move to there.

Even if such a move was made, however, Tatsuya anticipated that it would only happen in one to two months' time. He had to take care of some errands first before that.

If it was the end of the last century, that would mean cleaning up the house, clearing out everything together with everyone. For homes in the modern age where domestic chores have become highly automated, however, it was no problem leaving the cleaning up to automatons. After finishing lunch at home, Tatsuya and Miyuki left for Yakumo's Temple— Kyuuchouji Temple, leaving Minami behind.

Tatsuya changed into a suit while Miyuki changed into a kimono. Riding Tatsuya's motorcycle was out of the question; the skates didn't even need to be mentioned. Fortunately, both Tatsuya's house as well as Kyuuchouji Temple were within the public transportation grid where driver assistance AI could take them there automatically. Hence they used their private car instead of a public one.

The trip to Kyuuchouji Temple only took around ten minutes. A call made before leaving ensured they didn't show up with no one not being home.

Nonetheless, Tatsuya who had arrived punctually was instead asked to wait. Yakumo was definitely in the temple. However, an earlier visitor was in fact present. Arriving just before Tatsuya, the individual had suddenly appeared without having made any

arrangements beforehand.

Looking like he was a visitor, who Yakumo simply could not turn away.

One of Yakumo's most talented disciples who was close to Tatsuya apologized to him profusely.

Tatsuya was deciding if he should pay a visit on another day though ultimately was stopped by that disciple, and so the decision was made to wait longer. Tatsuya didn't have anything important on his schedule today and he was in no mood to work anyway, so with the thought that it was fine, Tatsuya continued waiting.

When Tatsuya was finally summoned, it was already 30 minutes since he arrived.

Leaving the lecture hall for the main hall, Tatsuya passed the courtyard when he saw the back of the previous visitor at the main gate.

It was a bald old man. Perhaps he was from the same Buddhist sect, Tatsuya thought, but he immediately dismissed it. Although the bald head suggested the visitor was a monk, what he was wearing however was a high-end suit and coat. Although monks who wore suits probably still exist, the old man was definitely not one, Tatsuya's intuition told him such. At the very least he wasn't a monk, and he gave off the impression of being one in a position of authority.

Probably feeling Tatsuya's stare, the old man turned his head around from the left.

The old man's left eye, it was cloudy white.

The old man's movement caused Tatsuya great unease. If the sight of one's left eye were impaired, one would usually turn his

head from the right.

In that eye, contained an extraordinary sight...

The old man immediately returned to his previous position, then he left walking away through the temple gate.

“Onii-sama?”

Hearing Miyuki’s call, Tatsuya instantaneously regained himself. His attention was drawn to that old man by such a degree.

Being unsure of what he was afraid of, Tatsuya shifted his focus.

Kneeling in front of Yakumo, Tatsuya did not inquire as to the old man’s identity.

“Sensei, we’ve visited at such a late hour. Happy New Year.”

Tatsuya was at the moment considering if he should investigate his other visitor. Though he had no reason to think so, asking would probably yield no answers.

Miyuki formally bowed, in harmony with Tatsuya.

“Congratulations. I already understand the situation so let’s not care too much about that.”

Receiving Yakumo’s answer, the pair of siblings raised their heads together.

“To already know, as expected of you.”

To Miyuki’s admiring look filled with respect, Yakumo smiled while shaking his head.

“No, no. This is nothing worthy of admiration. Because news of Miyuki-kun being made the next Head and the marriage between you two is spreading fairly quickly.”

“...Do so many people already know?”

To the vexed Tatsuya who asked so, Yakumo melodramatically widened his eyes in surprise in an act.

“Of course. For people related to magic, this is big news. Plus, it’s intelligence related to the Yotsuba Family that’s surrounded by mystery and doubts, receiving attention is expected. In addition to that, it’s almost time for the Ten Master Clans Conference. Especially since this year’s the quadrennial Ten Master Clans Selection Conference? Events that happen just before it would be impossible to keep a lid on.”

Tatsuya furrowed his brows while Miyuki appeared distressed. Although the notice was limited to the 28 Houses and the Hundred Families, news would rapidly spread once the Magic Association made the announcement. This news was originally meant to let third parties know of Tatsuya and Miyuki’s existence. To let the majority of those related to magic remember this was another intention of the Yotsuba Family.

That was at most only Maya’s plan, though. Tatsuya did not wish for things to be done this way. Putting aside the rumors on the street, how First High’s students would react during the new semester, was more than enough to depress the two.

“Speaking of which... To think that you two were not siblings but cousins, and engaged to each other.”

Yakumo laughed nastily.

“Even I was completely cheated. Congratulations.”

Hearing Yakumo’s congratulations, Miyuki blushed while shifting her line of sight.

However, Miyuki’s expression froze at Yakumo’s next sentence.

“Well, where does the truth end?”

“We heard that it is all true.”

As Yakumo revealed a smile filled with interest on one side, Tatsuya, immediately turning expressionless, replied without confidence.

“Hmm, so you heard, huh.”

“Since I have no memories on this matter, I can only learn from others.”

“Is that so, is that so. Even if it’s Tatsuya-kun, you wouldn’t remember what happened immediately after you were born. Not to mention things that happened before that, you will only be able to know of them by hearing from others. You have a point.”

Yakumo smiled while glaring coldly at Tatsuya.

Tatsuya, as if saying “It’s just as you’ve said”, lowered his head silently.

After this, only small talk took place and after about 20 minutes had passed Tatsuya and Miyuki stood up.

Yakumo as if naturally, stood up as well, following behind the siblings.

Under such circumstances, regardless of any misgivings they might have had, Tatsuya and Miyuki understood that it was meaningless to Yakumo.

The two, thus sandwiched between the disciple tasked with leading the way and Yakumo, proceeded towards the gate heading to the parking lot.

At the gate, Miyuki and Tatsuya stood properly once more, preparing to say their greetings once more.

However, the one faster to speak was Yakumo.

“Tatsuya-kun. Tomorrow, I will give you a more rigorous training, you would better prepare yourself mentally.”

Tatsuya, unprepared, widened his eyes. Yakumo's words just now implied that Tatsuya need not mind this matter and should come here to train as before. Yakumo meant this, despite Tatsuya's identity as being someone from the Yotsuba Family going public, getting along like how they used to, is just fine.

“Please take care of me this year as well, Sensei.”

Although Tatsuya did not reveal any indication that he was moved,

“Sensei, thank you.”

Though in Miyuki's eyes, tears welled up.



On the day after Tatsuya paid his visit to Kyuuchouji Temple, he left Miyuki at home to head to the JSDF 101 Brigade Base situated in Tsuchiura, Ibaraki to pay a visit.

The destination was the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion Headquarters. It was not for training but rather to greet Kazama.

Although Tatsuya was in a normal suit, the ID card he held was no less different than that held by a regular soldier. He only needed to pass through a card scanner and a bio-scanner before Tatsuya easily passed through the gate, after which he walked towards the building that the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion was in. Tatsuya initially planned to go straight to where Kazama was, but in the sturdy plaza spanning three floors both above and below ground, he saw a familiar figure, so he walked towards it.

“Happy New Year, Special Lieutenant Ooguro.”

“Happy New Year and congratulations, First Lieutenant Fujibayashi.”

As they saluted one another, Tatsuya and Fujibayashi

exchanged New Year's greetings. Tatsuya, though, appended his congratulations not only for the New Year's well wishes.

"Thank you, Special Lieutenant. The increase in salary at this point really sincerely makes me happy."

Fujibayashi replied in a joking manner. Tatsuya felt that her words contained some complex undercurrents, but did not point them out right then.

"I also wish to give my New Year's greetings to the Lieutenant Colonel."

"Of course, the Commander is waiting for us as well. Let's go."

Fujibayashi gave a bright smile before turning around.

Tatsuya followed behind her.

"It's Fujibayashi."

"Come in."

Kazama gave his permission to enter the room, in response to Fujibayashi's knock on his door. There was only one person in the Commander's Office.

"Excuse me. I brought Special Lieutenant Ooguro along."

"The two of you, stand there and wait a moment."

As he was speaking, Kazama operated the end of the desk. At the wall near the entrance, a part came down to the height of his hand, and stopped as it became parallel to the ground to form the seat of a chair.

Tatsuya and Fujibayashi sat down on the chairs that were prepared.

There were cushions placed on the seats, so it didn't feel uncomfortable sitting on them.

Kazama continued repeating movements using his stylus on the monitor reclined at a 15-degree angle, as if signing documents, before raising his head.

Fujibayashi and Tatsuya stood up together in front of the table where the monitor was stowed away. Tatsuya moved forward half a step before saluting Kazama.

“Commander, New Year’s greetings to you. Also, congratulations on your promotion this time.”

“Well. Special Lieutenant, I’m looking forward to your being active this year as well.”

“Yes. Thank you very much.”

Kazama loosened his expression, then stood up.

Behind Tatsuya and Fujibayashi’s backs, appeared a sofa that came up from underneath the floor.

“Well, sit down.”

While saying this, Kazama sat down on a simple inflatable sofa. Tatsuya then sat down on the sofa by the door as well.

The ceiling descended between the two, forming a suspended coffee table. A teapot, teacups and saucers had already been prepared on the table.

Fujibayashi, still standing, picked up a kettle, filled the teapot up with hot water, then poured the tea into the teacups after a while. She then placed the two teacups, on saucers, and teapot in front of Kazama and Tatsuya. Smiling in response to Tatsuya who thanked her, Fujibayashi started moving to the left of Kazama.

“Although I don’t think you have any matters which you specifically need help with, you didn’t come here today just for New Year’s greetings did you?”

Kazama asked Tatsuya as he picked up the teacup. Although the cup was not filled with boiling hot water, the teacup made of thin celadon should still have been pretty hot, Kazama however did not reveal any reaction to it.

“I heard the Commander received a promotion, so of course I can’t pretend I didn’t know about it.”

In response to Kazama’s direct question, Tatsuya answered while smiling. Although it was just to be civil, the smile was not accompanied by any emotions. Instead of a sincere expression, a smile was chosen instead.

“Although it’s called a promotion.”

Kazama responded to Tatsuya’s faked smile with a smile of his own.

However, Kazama’s was a forced smile.

“My salary hardly increased and compared to my contemporaries, I’m already one of the last. Well, even though I feel better that I was promoted, it’s a good thing that situations where my subordinates will be put under pressure will disappear.”

Just as Kazama had said, in the official routine orders sent out on January 1st, the promotion list wasn’t limited to just Kazama. As Tatsuya pointed out, Fujibayashi was promoted from a Second Lieutenant to a First Lieutenant, Sanada and Yanagi were both promoted from Captains to Majors, their military ranks increased.

When Kazama was younger, in carrying out some of his missions, he once displeased the Central higher-ups, causing his records and deeds, strength, reputation and position to be suppressed, inconsistent with his accolades. After becoming the Commanding Officer of the Independent Magic-Equipped

Battalion, it was thanks to the efforts of the Brigade Commander-Major General Saeki that he finally became a Field Officer, but the Bureaucrats in charge of Military Affairs and Politics did not plan on allowing Kazama to get promoted again.

However, the results achieved in the Yokohama Incident was not something that the Ministry of Defense could overlook. Instead, reasoning that the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion was a secret unit, the excuse that immediate promotions would expose them as the operatives of the Battalion was given. Thus the promotion that should have been decided in January and July of the previous year was delayed, but they could not keep ignoring the protests of those who had achieved victory and had not been given what they deserved. Hence, they could only send out the routine orders that Kazama was among the ones being promoted.

He was accompanied by Sanada, Yanagi and Fujibayashi, the three of whom received similarly delayed promotions by one rank.

“A raise in rank shouldn’t be a bad thing. Even if it’s just a little, if there’s an increase in income, nothing beats it.”

“You have a point. Speaking of the matter on the Special Lieutenant’s income, my feelings are a little complex.”

“The difference in my income isn’t that great. Since CADs are a product of the budding Magic Engineering sector, its market remains very small.”

Tatsuya and Kazama both smiled at the same time. After which they simultaneously tightened their expressions.

“Lieutenant Colonel, how are the anti-spy measures?”

“They are complete.”

In response to Tatsuya’s question, Kazama nodded while

answering.

Tatsuya took in a small breath of air.

“Lieutenant Colonel, has the structure of the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion changed?”

“There are no changes this time. Because our Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion is positioned as a secret unit, the Major General feels that it’s not a problem even if the ranks and the job scopes don’t match up.”

“Understood.”

Tatsuya was deployed with the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion as a Special Forces Soldier and his identity was closely related, in a personal way, with Kazama or Sanada. If the head changed, then considerations had to be made if he would be affected as well.

Those words just now were not just polite remarks, rather they were instead sincere in respect to the interests of the Yotsuba Family. If he must be placed under the command of someone who couldn’t be trusted, he would have to re-examine if he should cut ties with the military. This time however, it looked like this worry was unwarranted.

“Tatsuya, we can be just like how we were before, so do you think we can receive your support?”

This time, Kazama questioned Tatsuya with a nervous expression.

“Yes.”

Tatsuya lightly nodded his head, indicating assent.

“Weren’t you entrusted with a new identity by the Yotsuba Family?”

“That does not conflict with the interests of the Independent

Magic-Equipped Battalion.”

Tatsuya replied not with “the JSDF” but with “the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion” in response to Kazama’s question, after he consciously thought about it.

“At least, for now.”

The meaning of then adding “for now”, Kazama clearly understood.

“Is that so.”

In this way, Kazama quickly accepted it.

“We predict that in the coming months, the international situation will start to escalate rapidly, including within Japan. Even if it doesn’t reach the scale of another World War, the possibility of mid-level military conflicts happening in the near future, specifically within a year, in the East Asia region is significant.”

“Are we referring to the Army Staff’s views? Or the General Staff’s views?”

Leading up to World War III which lasted for 20 years, the JSDF as an organization changed on a massive scale. The Ministry of Defense was shuffled into the consolidated Joint Staff, which now included the General Headquarters of the Defense Army, Defense Navy and Defense Air Force. The Joint Staff became affiliated with the Joint Staff Office and reports directly to the Chairman of the Joint Staff, that now, at the same time, assumed the position of Director of the Joint Staff Office.

The function of the Joint Staff Office was to convene during emergencies to act as the JSDF’s highest decision-making body.

For example, during last year’s Yokohama Incident, within two hours of the start of the invasion, the Joint Staff Office convened and subsequently decided for the authorization and use of

“Material Burst”.

Within the current system, under the Army, Navy and Air Force, each had set up their own respective General Headquarters responsible for managing intelligence, combat and deployment. Their difference from the consolidated Staff Office was that they were only responsible for analyzing military intelligence as well as providing suggestions.

Tatsuya’s question was asking about which level of analysis Kazama’s earlier statements had passed.

“No, it’s Excellency Saeki’s analysis.”

Kazama’s answer was not one Tatsuya expected. Looks like it was, at most, the 101st Battalion’s informal internal analysis. However, Tatsuya’s trust in the prediction of military conflicts instead soared.

It came from an excellent and experienced expert without considerations of politicians’ judgment, without considerations for popular opinion or political bias. It could be said that it was the result of pure analysis.

Although Tatsuya did not at all want the prediction to be realized, he didn’t have the confidence to optimistically pronounce it as baseless.

“Although the Ten Master Clans is an organization for the protection of Magician’s rights, they will not shy away from the duty of National Defense. Based on this, the Yotsuba Family and the JSDF share the same interests.”

“I won’t involve you with matters unrelated to National Defense, meaning I won’t impose upon you any obligations. Tatsuya, I’m looking forward to working with you this year.”

With the same phrase that started it, Kazama ended the conversation with Tatsuya.

After greeting Kazama, Tatsuya had originally planned to greet Sanada, Yanagi and Yamanaka. However Yamanaka was not in the base at the moment, while Sanada and Yanagi were currently occupied. In a dilemma as to whether he should wait somewhere or go straight home, Tatsuya was invited to the officer café by Fujibayashi, who helped ascertain the three's status, instead.

The time now was 10:50 A.M. Although it was still too early to be having lunch, it was just right to have a cup of coffee. Especially since it was still the New Year period, the Brigade as a whole had not started training in earnest, causing the use of the café by officers making it crowded and rather lively.

Although it was the New Year period, the personnel were still on duty, and the officers were all in uniforms. Fujibayashi, too, was wearing the female logistics personnel uniform. Conversely, Tatsuya was wearing a three-piece suit. If he had been holding his coat in one hand he might not have been feeling so indisposed, but in the present situation, he was subtly conspicuous in the café.

Fujibayashi looked on in interest at Tatsuya who was taking his discomfort calmly.

“...So Tatsuya-kun you can be shy like this too.”

Since Tatsuya was trying to preserve his dignity, he didn't say it aloud but looked at Fujibayashi helplessly.

“I don't really like attracting people's attention.”

Hearing Tatsuya's reply, Fujibayashi almost burst into laughter.

“Then, this time could be said to be a catastrophe for you.”

“There is nothing to be done about it. Especially since the choice to refuse doesn't exist.”

Fujibayashi, as if attempting to probe Tatsuya's innermost

feelings, gazed at Tatsuya.

“Is this about the marriage?”

“Of course.”

“Do you hate it?”

“It’s only that there is no other way. Being ordered to get engaged to someone who has always been your sister, my brain can’t switch tracks so quickly. Especially understanding that Miyuki must have a fiancé, makes it harder to resist...”

Tatsuya’s reply was merely a polite remark. It wasn’t because he was required to be the fiancé but probably rather because he absolutely could not let go of Miyuki.

If anybody who knew the sibling’s feelings for each other could think of it, it wasn’t difficult for Fujibayashi to see through Tatsuya. However, out of Fujibayashi’s mouth didn’t come words of teasing Tatsuya.

“A fiancé is necessary, huh...”

Tatsuya looked at Fujibayashi, surprised.

However, he didn’t ask about it. Because considering Fujibayashi’s age, it was easy to infer that her relatives must have demanded she get married.

“...Recently, it’s been irritating. Speaking of which, I’ve been told I should be getting married too.”

Although Tatsuya wanted to avoid the topic at hand, it was instead brought up by Fujibayashi.

“Even though I also know that I’m already at this age...”

Considering the modern trend of Magicians being required to marry early, it wasn’t difficult to imagine that Fujibayashi was under enormous pressure from her family. It was because of this that Tatsuya didn’t say anything to Fujibayashi.

Precisely because of knowing Fujibayashi's reasons for not wanting to marry, it was even harder to say heartless things.

"I know. It's about time to properly straighten out my state of mind. If I keep being stuck on that person, he probably won't be happy either."

Today, unexpectedly, Fujibayashi stepped on a landmine even Tatsuya wanted to avoid. Compared to the other Officers' curious eyes, listening to Fujibayashi's words now, instead, made Tatsuya even more uncomfortable.

In the Defense Battle in Okinawa in the year 2092, Fujibayashi lost her soon-to-be-married fiancé. Even though it was one arranged by their parents, she was still never able to forget him.

Her fiancé was new. He was killed-in-action in his first deployment.

Fujibayashi, who was previously a researcher, also became a uniformed military personnel because of the death of her fiancé. She didn't hate the military for losing him, but perhaps because in his place, she wanted to fulfil his dreams. Tatsuya had not heard the details to this degree.

What Tatsuya understood was that Fujibayashi was unable to forget her fiancé who was killed-in-action, and the people surrounding her could not forgive that.

"Ah, sorry! I really... To make you listen to my complaining, it would only annoy you Tatsuya-kun."

Sensing Tatsuya's difficult position, Fujibayashi was embarrassed and hurriedly apologized.

"No... I think your family is only worried about you."

To the Fujibayashi of now, Tatsuya could only say something to this degree.



Just as Yakumo had said, rumors of Tatsuya and company had speedily spread among the Magicians.

“Shizuku, that, is it true!?”

“...There’s no mistake.”

Moving her line of sight away from the Honoka who was standing on the other side of the table, Shizuku replied with difficulty.

“Miyuki is the next Head of the Yotsuba Family!?”

“Yeah.”

As if losing her strength, Honoka lightly sat back down.

In front of the two were bite-sized cakes and red tea.

Today was Sunday, January 6th. Shizuku and Honoka were in the Kitayama household’s dining room enjoying desert time after the meal.

— — Although the atmosphere was turning anything but “enjoyable”.

With Honoka, who rarely came over to play (to be precise, it was Shizuku who invited her), talking about this topic made Shizuku herself uncomfortable, but compared to telling her suddenly after meeting her again in the future, she felt it was better to tell her right from the start.

As Shizuku had thought, Honoka did indeed suffer a serious blow, and she was now sitting in the chair, in a listless state.

“Miyuki is... So it’s like this...”

However, the listlessness persisted for a surprisingly short time. Honoka muttered, as if accepting it, then resolutely looked at Shizuku.

“Although it gave me a fright, I can accept this. If it’s the Ten

Master Clans and even one of the Yotsuba Family, it feels like having that kind of ability and power is understandable.”

Although Honoka’s expression was tinged with loneliness, she looked at Shizuku with an understanding expression.

“Well, from who did you hear that from? Auntie? Or from Uncle?”

“The Yotsuba Family contacted the Heads of the Main Members of the Hundred Families through the Magic Association. It was one of my Mom’s contacts from the old days that told her.”

“Ah, if Papa were home he might have told me.”

Honoka’s dad was a subordinate of a strong member of the Hundred Families. Because the news was not specially designated a secret, the possibility that the source of the rumors came from the workplace wasn’t low.

Initially, Shizuku was feeling slightly lucky at the fact that Honoka’s dad was not home. Honoka’s dad did not know about her being in love. Just bringing up anything related to Tatsuya and Miyuki to her dad might have caused him to warn her to stay away from the two.

“Honoka.”

“Yeah, what is it?”

However, for Shizuku, it was not easy to properly handle this matter.

Especially knowing she wasn’t good with words, the trouble of exactly how she should tell her started growing heavier.

(But... I really must tell her.)

Honoka might cry. No, she will definitely cry. At that time, the only one able to let her cry out honestly was herself, and

Shizuku's sense of duty began to well up.

If she didn't do so, it would feel like running away from the topic.

"Actually, there was a follow-up to what I heard from Mom."

"Follow-up? Exactly what is it?"

Shizuku took a small breath,

"It's that Miyuki and Tatsuya-san are not actually siblings but rather cousins. Also, it looks like even Miyuki and Tatsuya-san did not know this. Following that, Tatsuya-san has also been chosen to be Miyuki's fiancé."

Finished in one breath.

"It cannot be..."

Honoka's face tried to remain strong, then immediately broke into a smile.

"Rea-aaa-llly, Shizuku. Just stop with this type of cruel joke. April Fools is still three months away."

Honoka waited for Shizuku to smile as well. Waiting, for Shizuku to reply with something like "I've been found out" with an expression without malice.

However, Shizuku only looked into Honoka's eyes with a calm expression.

"Hey, Shizuku. Stop joking."

Fear appeared in Honoka's eyes. Even so, maintaining a smile, she implored Shizuku with a half-joking tone to tell her that this was a joke.

"Honoka."

However, Shizuku's tone wasn't what Honoka was waiting for, but was a sincere tone.

“...It’s true?”

Honoka asked, while shaking.

“...Yeah.”

Shizuku affirmed painfully.

“How could...!”

Honoka stood up, wanting to run out of the dining room.

“Honoka!”

While her back, was tightly hugged by Shizuku.

“Let go of me!”

Honoka struggled with slightly rough actions. She was not in fact conscious of who it was that hugged her. More importantly, even where she herself wanted to go, no, what she wanted to do, she did not know.

However, a type of survival instinct to escape from what she feared made her want to run with all her might, away from the darkness.

With the hands pushing away, their strength was totally uncontrolled.

“Kya!”

A wail. As well as the sound of a body hitting the table. The sound of the grinding of table legs. The sound of chairs flipping. The sound of forks being strewn across the floor, and of utensils breaking.

“...Uhh.”

Followed by a moan suppressing the pain, which pulled Honoka’s consciousness back to the present scene.

What she saw upon turning her head in panic, was Shizuku lying beside the flipped chair. While on the floor behind her, were

fragments from all the broken utensils.

“Shizuku!? S-Sorry! Are you alright!?”

Forgetting what she was crying about — —changing into a face like she was about to cry about something else, Honoka hurriedly ran to Shizuku’s side.

“It’s nothing.”

Lightly holding onto the hand that was trying to help her, Shizuku stood up almost with her own strength.

“It was only a light bump. There’s no injury.”

This sentence was not said only for Honoka’s benefit, but at the same time also for the maids who had rushed in upon hearing the commotion.

Shizuku stood up as if wanting to prove her point, not revealing a single sign of pain. However, upon looking down at the skirt of her dress, she frowned slightly.

“Spilt on myself as expected. Let’s change in my room.”

The skirt of the dress, was ruined by the milk tea that was sent flying.

“That, let me help— —”

The speech of one of the maids, was cut off by the expressionless Shizuku.

“No need. Compared to that, I’m sorry to bother you with this instead.”

“Understood.”

However the maids, knowing that this family’s “Ojou-sama” did not like people helping her enter the bath or change clothes, no longer brought up the above-mentioned request and immediately attended to Shizuku’s request.

“Honoka come with me.”

“Y-Yeah.”

Shizuku got slammed onto the table and the floor— —although slightly exaggerated— —the shock that Honoka had received just now was overshadowed by the shock of pushing her to the ground, and she agreed to Shizuku’s words without even thinking about it.

“That, Shizuku... I’m sorry, I was so violent against you...”

Upon arriving in Shizuku’s room, Honoka looked like she had already calmed down. In the room with only the two of them, what Honoka said, was an apology to Shizuku.

“Don’t mind it. There were no injuries, and it doesn’t look like it will leave any scars.”

As she was replying, Shizuku who had already taken off her dress, dropped it to the ground. After which she let Honoka examine the left side of her waist, shoulder and elbow that were hit. Indeed, Shizuku’s snow-white skin showed some redness, but it was apparent that it wasn’t to the degree that it would leave scars.

“Honoka, sit anywhere you like.”

Having changed into a maximum-length one-piece dress made of thick cloth, Shizuku told Honoka while standing.

Honoka looked around the room, then sat down on a side of the big bed.

“I’ve kept you waiting.”

Shizuku who had finished changing sat down beside Honoka. The fact that Honoka was taller, was reflected in their height when sitting down.

Naturally, Shizuku's peeking from below, collided directly with Honoka's face.

"Honoka, are you okay?"

This sentence became the trigger, causing the sorrow in Honoka's heart to awaken.

Tears welled up in Honoka's two eyes.

Shizuku straightened her back, putting her hands around Honoka's shoulders, hugging her.

"Tatsuya-san and Miyuki are cousins, is it really true?"

"Mhm."

"Tatsuya-san and Miyuki, it's confirmed that they're engaged..."

While sobbing, Honoka asked.

In response to the question she had already answered once, Shizuku tightly hugged her friend as an answer.

"How could this be... It's too cruel..."

Just like a dam breaking, Honoka started crying continuously.

"Tatsuya-san said before... Clearly that they were siblings... Miyuki too... Said that we were friends..."

Shizuku, without saying anything, put one knee on the bed and hugged Honoka's head tightly against her chest.

As the sounds of Honoka's crying started to weaken— —not stopping, but rather tiring from crying— —Shizuku remained hugging Honoka tightly against her chest while moving her lips towards Honoka's ear.

"Honoka, you have three paths to choose from."

Honoka's body, revealed a reaction different from sobbing. Confirming that her words had indeed been registered, Shizuku

continued speaking.

“The first path would be to give up on Tatsuya-san. I’m afraid this is the option that will hurt the least.”

Honoka did not react. She was waiting for the next option.

“The second path would be to still not give up, continue to go on the offensive against Tatsuya-san. Tatsuya-san views Miyuki as a sister, I am pretty sure this point is true. For Tatsuya-san, and for Miyuki, the matter of them not being siblings should be very surprising.”

“...Is that so.”

Honoka’s voice was mixed with crying.

“Mhm.”

Shizuku specifically did not use words such as “probably” and “I think”, tersely making a stronger statement.

“Miyuki probably saw Tatsuya-san as a love interest of the opposite sex from the start but Tatsuya-san’s feelings are at most love for a sister.

Hence, to suddenly confirm their engagement, Tatsuya-san should be confused as well.”

“But, they’ve already confirmed their engagement...”

“They’ve only yet to reject it. It doesn’t mean he has accepted it, hence, the chances are not zero.”

Shizuku did not say “there was a chance” but rather “was not zero”.

As for its meaning, to the Honoka of now was rather easy to understand.

“...The third path is?”

Shizuku briefly sucked in a breath of air, and then said so

hesitantly.

“...The third is, the matter of becoming Tatsuya-san’s mistress.”

“Mistress!?”

Perhaps it was too much of a surprise. Honoka raised her tear-stained face to look at Shizuku.

“Of course, it doesn’t need to be right away. Miyuki might not immediately become the Head of the Yotsuba, either, and I think the marriage is something for the future. Becoming his mistress is a matter for after Tatsuya-san and Miyuki get married.”

“Being a mistress.”



“Honoka, you can’t bear to not have Tatsuya-san all to yourself?”

“This! ...maybe a little, but, compared to not being able to be together.”

Honoka, blushing and lowering her head, was hugged by Shizuku again.

“Tatsuya-san possesses a rather special magical disposition. The matter of having his hereditary genes being inherited by more people, is something the Yotsuba Family should consider as well.”

Against Shizuku’s chest, Honoka tightly clasped her hands.

“...The one that will hurt Honoka the least is the first path. Giving up on the second path at the time when it becomes untenable will stop you from being hurt again as well. With the third path, however, even if everything is smooth sailing, you will have to live on while bearing irreparable wounds. Not only for you Honoka but even for Miyuki as well.”

“.....”

“As for me, I would actually prefer you to take the first path. However, the choice is yours.”

Shizuku knew that the problem was very cruel. However, if things were left as they are, Honoka would only drown in the abyss of sorrow, unable to float up. Shizuku was rather afraid that it could become like this.

If she was left to continue like this, Honoka’s sorrow was far too close to extinguishing her dreams. Shizuku was even more afraid that this would happen.

Shizuku no longer said anything, awaiting Honoka’s reply.

“...I can’t give it up.”

That was Honoka's answer.

"I, as of yet, I am still unable to give up. However, I hate that I am not the one that he loves the most. Miyuki and I have the resolve to hurt each other, but to hurt her over and over again, I definitely can't do it."

Shizuku started feeling heartache. Somewhere in her heart however, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Then."

"I will choose the second path. Until the possibility reaches zero, no matter how many times it takes, I will approach him. ... Although, I can't do anything right now."

To the last part of what Honoka said, Shizuku did not know how to reply and furrowed her brows.

"...A bit of rest is a must."

"A rest in love?"

"The rest of a heart in love."

Honoka lightly laughed against Shizuku's chest.

Shizuku let go of Honoka then sat down properly, before revealing a shy smile.

Chapter 2

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January 8th, the first day of the new semester. Tatsuya's group of three people went to school 30 minutes ahead of the usual time.

It wasn't because of some sort of opening ceremony. Even though the three of them were members of the Student Council, it wasn't because they needed to make preparations for an event related to the beginning of the new semester either.

The reason they were going there earlier was because they had received a direct message from school. Yesterday, Tatsuya and Miyuki received an email asking them to come to the Principal's Office before the school opened.

The email had arrived in the afternoon. At the time, even though Miyuki was still in the house, Tatsuya was already headed towards FLT.

Therefore, it was only after dinner that they had a chance to talk about it, they immediately understood the reason behind the summons.

It would be hard to think of any other reason than the recent confirmation to the Magic Association about Tatsuya and Miyuki's positions about being a part of the Yotsuba Family.

A mix of questioning, and reprimand for reporting false

information about their identities to the school and pressure to ensure that, despite the fact they were engaged, they would still act with moderation within the school grounds. These kinds of things were expected.

This prediction would prove to be spot on.

In front of Tatsuya and Miyuki was the Dean Yaosaka, and deeper into the office, behind an imposing desk, was the Principal himself, Momoyama Azuma. Meanwhile, Minami was in her classroom. The mail had been addressed to Tatsuya and Miyuki only.

“Then, you’re saying that you never intended to report false information to the school?”

“Indeed. Since it was even recorded in the Family Registry, up until now, I too believed it.”

Momoyama could have been frowning due to the militaristic tone of Tatsuya, or it could have been because of his composed attitude, devoid of any tension, that he felt was bordering on insolence.

Yaosaka had become quite perceptive of the Principal’s mood changes over the years and he was starting to get nervous himself as he continued to interrogate Tatsuya.

“Then that means the Family Registry was falsified? In the eventuality that your custodians intentionally falsified official papers, there is a possibility of you being erased from the School Registry.”

“About that, I have heard that you have already received a letter of apology from my father as well as documents explaining this whole affair.”

“I certainly received such a letter. That there was a writing error from your departed mother on your birth certificate and

that you had never noticed until now, was that it. However, I question the idea that it is impossible not to notice such a mistake for as long as 17 years.”

“My father holds no interest in me. Now that I think about it, it might have been because I was never his biological son.”

Even after hearing of a parent never caring about his son, Yaosaka’s expression didn’t particularly waver. That’s because these sort of stories, whether in the present or the past, were not that rare.

Therefore, he did not think of Tatsuya’s excuse as a lie.

“Principal, I do not think that Shiba-kun’s explanation has any particularly strange points.”

Momoyama did not return an answer immediately.

“The Public Data, including the Family Registry, has already been corrected. If we take their family’s special circumstances into account, I do not think that there is a need for punishment, what do you think.”

“I understand the circumstances.”

Momoyama was solemnly nodding. On the other hand, Yaosaka was showing clear signs of relaxation.

“Indeed, neither of you is responsible for this. It is not the place of the educational team to inflict punishment on the innocent party. However, even if your revocation from the school registry will be canceled this time, do not forget what such errors can bring about. Please transmit this important reminder to your parents.”

“Understood.”

In order to match the bowing Tatsuya, Miyuki made courteous bows as well.

“From here on, even though you are engaged, I will require that you act with moderation within the school’s premises. With your special circumstances in mind, I don’t plan on opposing your cohabitation.”

“Thank you very much.”

The siblings bowed to Momoyama once again.

“...Up until now there were a lot of things that were excused because you were siblings, however, do not forget that from now on you will be seen as engaged.”

“Understood.”

After Yaosaka brought this fact to their attention, the questioning and admonition in the Principal’s Office came to an end.



The “sermon” from the Dean and the Principal ended much quicker than expected. Still, compared to the usual time Tatsuya was a little late in going to Class 2-E.

“Ah, there he is.”

That was probably the reason why Erika had been waiting by the window until he arrived.

“Yo, Tatsuya. Been a while.”

It seems like Leo, after learning that Tatsuya hadn’t yet arrived, had went back to his own classroom for a while. Leo greeted him from behind when he passed by Class-F.

“Erika, Leo, long time no see.”

Tatsuya stopped in the hallway and answered them like this. By the way, the reason Erika’s name was the first to come out of his mouth was because otherwise she would enter a bit of a sulking mood.

“Tatsuya-kun, when did you return from Tokyo?”

The moment Erika enquired so, Tatsuya recalled that he had made a promise to report as soon as his business was finished.

“Four days ago. Sorry about not keeping you informed.”

Tatsuya wasn't the type to forget things. To be more precise, he was unable to forget things. However, this once, he didn't even have the spare time to remember it.

“It's okay. It must've been pretty tough right?”

“I know right, but anyway, it's probably going to be even worse from now on. I've already got past the initial shock so, no problem on my end.”

Tatsuya felt a slight surprise at Leo's unexpected speech. It was no surprise at all for Erika to be aware of the latest letter from the Yotsuba Family to the rest of the Magic Association. The Chiba Family was included in the list of the various Families to which duplicates of said letter were sent to after all.

However, Leo's house had no relationship with the Japanese Magic Community. As a matter of fact, Leo's magical genes came from his grandfather who was a refugee originating from Germany, he has no blood ties to any other Magician Family that Japan exploits. That is why he shouldn't have the means to get information from the Magic Association nor even hear rumors from any of the Houses that are part of it.

Has the information about me, Miyuki and the Yotsuba Family's relationship already spread that far... The answer to the question Tatsuya was asking himself was soon afterwards given to him.

As soon as he entered the classroom, all of his classmates' stares gathered on him, then immediately turned away.

“Good morning.”

Tatsuya more or less understood what the others were thinking of him, still, he greeted Mizuki who was sitting next to him as usual.

“Ah, umm, good morning...”

As expected, Mizuki immediately averted her eyes after returning the greeting. It was made obvious that she had heard about Tatsuya and Miyuki’s situation.

Tatsuya also turned his eyes away from Mizuki and ejected the terminal attached to his desk.

The two people who had talked with Tatsuya before he entered the classroom. Erika, who was resting her elbow on the window’s bottom frame, and Leo who was right behind him, sent anxious looks his way.

Tatsuya met their gazes and wore an expression that said “don’t worry”.

This morning, Mikihiro didn’t appear in Class 2-E.



The morning classes came to an end. It looks like Tatsuya’s classmates’ way of dealing with him was to ignore him as much as they could.

Tatsuya typically didn’t talk much with his classmates in the first place; however, it was the first time not even a single person addressed him for half a day. Despite the fact he had kept his distance, it had been a daily occurrence that people asked him for help when they had problems.

Tatsuya didn’t care about his classmates’ stares, even if they were filled with ill will or hostility. If they were ready to ostracize him then he would just have to shut out and deny their very existences.

It’s not as if Tatsuya hated humans.

But at the same time, it's not like he particularly liked them.
— — Himself included.

Tatsuya strongly felt that so long as Miyuki was near him, he didn't need anything else.

The existence of people other than Miyuki was of no real importance to him, although it was preferable to have people around in order to live a pleasant school life, it went no further than that. For that reason however, he wanted to maintain at least reasonably good relationships so as not to let them turn into clear hostile ones.

In the current atmosphere, it would be unpleasant to make the first step.

That was what Tatsuya thought.

"Mizuki, I'm going to the Student Council Room, could you please relay so if anyone asks."

"Y-yes!"

Her voice to Tatsuya, Mizuki's reaction showed signs of fear.

So as to not lose Mizuki completely, it had been necessary to interact, even at the cost of scaring her.

Tatsuya wasn't lying when he said he was heading towards the Student Council Room. However he made a U-turn in front of the door.

That was because Honoka and Shizuku were inside.

Without opening the door nor using his "Elemental Sight", he could understand this much, if they were only separated by a single door. It would be another story if they could make their presence difficult to notice like Tatsuya, for him, this had become an unconscious act, regular students however were unlikely to

conceal their presence on the school grounds.

Since Honoka was a member of the Student Council it wasn't surprising that she was present. He was also used to Shizuku spending a lot of time there as well. However, the fact that the two of them were present on this particular day was indeed surprising.

Contrary to his expectations, Miyuki wasn't present in the Student Council's Room.

Tatsuya left the place as it was.

The reason Honoka and Shizuku were in the Student Council Room was to escape the curious glances they would be exposed to in the dining room. It was a pretty well-known fact in First High that they were close friends of Miyuki's. The number of girls in their second year who also knew about Honoka's feelings towards Tatsuya were not just a few.

For the same reason, Miyuki avoided the dining room. Even more so because she was the one who the rumors were talking about. As the Student Council President, Miyuki often ate her lunch in the Student Council's Room. Tatsuya thought it'd be the case today as well. If anything, Tatsuya thought that the one who would want to avoid Miyuki was Honoka, but it seems like it was the opposite.

Keeping in mind what the Principal told to them this morning, for the time being Tatsuya thought it would be best to avoid having lunch together. It seems like Miyuki thought this would be a necessity as well, Tatsuya had come up with this proposition as soon as they came out of the Principal's Office, wearing a dissatisfied expression she had reluctantly accepted.

For that reason, they hadn't determined any particular meeting spot.

However, by focusing his senses even just a little, Tatsuya would be able to immediately tell where Miyuki was. It wasn't that difficult to imagine what she was up to either, after confirming her position, Tatsuya headed towards the place she was.

The door to the rooftop was opened. And without a shadow of a doubt, Miyuki was there.

Even though snow hadn't fallen or anything like that, the temperature was still only in the first half of the single digit range. If you think about it, there really wasn't any other student who would come here with such cold weather. It was a good place for someone who wanted to be alone.

"Ah, Onii-sama. I've been waiting for you."

Well, it wasn't exactly "to be alone" though more like "for the two of us to be alone". It seems like that was Miyuki's plan from the very beginning.

"If you had told me I'd have come immediately you know?"

Miyuki softly smiled at Tatsuya's answer.

"There is no way Onii-sama wouldn't know where to find me."

Befitting of the smile turned towards him, Tatsuya's body was being enveloped in a gentle warmth. It wasn't just his imagination. That was Miyuki's magic.

"Onii-sama, you still haven't had lunch right? Please sit over here."

Miyuki offered the seat next to her. She was currently sitting on a three-person bench, at the right end of it. Since Tatsuya had originally planned on sitting next to her, he accepted her offer without any reservation.

Miyuki took out two boxes of varying sizes from the insulated pack that was resting on her lap. The small one was left on her lap and she presented the bigger one to Tatsuya. Needless to say, they were bento-boxes.

“So you even prepared bento-boxes?”

“Yes, I prepared them after Onii-sama went to his morning training. I thought they would be useful today.”

Now that she mentioned it, Tatsuya remembered that Minami was carrying a fairly large bag while they were headed towards the Principal’s Office.

“I see. Thank you, Miyuki.”

Tatsuya thought that it’d have been pointless to not express his gratitude beforehand. However that’s not exactly what he should have said, or so he thought. Miyuki most certainly prepared the bento-boxes because she anticipated what would happen today. And the reason for keeping silent about them was probably that she didn’t want him to realize how bad the situation would be.

“Don’t mention it. Still, it looks like we’ll end up having lunch together after all.”

Tatsuya couldn’t help but turn a wry smile at Miyuki’s words mixed with a little scorn.

“If you had told me about the bento-boxes this morning I wouldn’t have suggested we take our lunches separately.”

“Oh my, is that true?”

Despite her dissatisfied tone Miyuki was in a cheerful mood. Probably because, setting the small details aside, they were having lunch with only the two of them.

However, in Tatsuya’s eyes, a little bit of bravado might have been mixed in as well.

“Alright then. Then, allow me to dig in.”

“Please, do so.”

Receiving the authorization to, Tatsuya opened the lid of the bento-box.

Showing a mischievous smile, Miyuki held out a pair of chopsticks for Tatsuya.

“Anyway, there should be no problem in allowing me to feed you as well.”

Maintaining her balance so as not to drop the bento-box on her own lap, Miyuki picked up a piece of Tatsuya’s lunch with her own chopsticks.

She then brought it near Tatsuya’s mouth.

“Allow me.”

Saying so without any sign of panic, Tatsuya moved his neck so as to eat what Miyuki was holding with her chopsticks without touching them.

Miyuki’s face quickly reddened.

Miyuki rearranged her sitting posture in a panic and opened the lid of her own bento-box.

In other words, she had just performed a self-destroying move.

“The bento-box prepared by Miyuki is as expected, really delicious.”

While openly stating so, Tatsuya stole side-glances at Miyuki’s face.

And, he estimated that the teasing should not go any further. To tell the truth he really wanted to follow up with a “Won’t you feed me for a bit longer?” but restrained himself.

“...Being just the two of us is nice, however, having only the

wintry sky as a scenery can get pretty depressing. If we could find a suitable, unused classroom I'd like to relocate there from tomorrow on."

Tatsuya didn't want this little joke to take a bad turn so he changed the subject, Miyuki, who was hanging her head down, looked up at him.

"Is it okay for us to... eat together from tomorrow on?"

"I think it might be preferable to do it like this for a while. Although, the days when the Student Council has a lot of work will be different."

Even though that was going in the opposite direction from what they had planned this morning, Miyuki didn't object.

"Let's find one before the end of the day."

Clenching her hands into fists, Miyuki powerfully declared so.

"I'll search for one on my own as well, so don't push yourself too hard."

At Tatsuya's smile, the younger sister's burning enthusiasm calmed down.

"— — How was Class-A?"

Tatsuya started this conversation after the both of them had finished their bento-boxes and cleaned up.

"I know it can't be helped but it's still uncomfortable. It looks like everyone is looking at me from afar and it feels like they're all talking behind our backs."

"No one addressed me either today."

"I wasn't even able to talk to Honoka or Shizuku."

Hearing this, Tatsuya slightly frowned.

“...Were they angry?”

“As long as I was directly talking to them they responded but... Yes. At the very least I got the impression that they were avoiding me.”

Miyuki seemed a little lonely while answering.

“Won’t it be alright even if we don’t talk to them about it? I think these two will understand that we had no choice in the matter.”

“...It would be great if that was the case.”

Miyuki’s smile had a tinge of sadness mixed in it.

“I think it’ll be alright. There’s no use worrying about something we can’t do anything about.”

Tatsuya put his hand on Miyuki’s cheek. Miyuki pressed her own hand against his and shut her eyes.

“Understood.”

“Time might settle all of this on its own. For now, it’s not to a point where we should be pessimistic about it.”

“I see... However, that is the same for Onii-sama.”

Miyuki turned a playful gaze towards Tatsuya.

“Since we’re talking about Onii-sama, maybe your friends are thinking of leaving you alone ‘until time settles things’ as well? I think that occasionally, one should step up to solve these kinds of problems, don’t you think?”

“You got me.”

Tatsuya smiled wryly with a “touché” expression.



After returning home, Tatsuya called the direct number for the Yotsuba Family’s Head.

Even though Tatsuya wasn't allowed to directly call Maya up until New Year's Eve, their current relationship was officially that of a Mother and Son.

Miyuki was next to Tatsuya. Even though this was usually the time to start preparing dinner, Miyuki knew this matter took precedence.

Tonight's dinner had been left in Minami's hands.

[Sorry to have kept you waiting. The timing on Tatsuya-san's report is excellent.]

In fact, this call was the second. During the first call it had been Hayama that appeared on the screen. He asked them to call back in roughly 20 minutes, instruction that Tatsuya followed to a T.

"Do you have an order for us?"

[Would you let me hear your story first, Tatsuya-san?]

Even though Tatsuya was slightly anxious about what business she might have with them, he obediently followed her request.

"Today we were called by Momoyama, the Principal of First High."

Starting like this, Tatsuya reported what had been said during their meeting.

[Momoyama-sensei is pretty strict...]

Maya let out an amused tone for some reason. Judging by the way she was talking about him, they were probably acquaintances.

[In any case, thanks for reporting. Tatsuya-san doesn't need to do anything in particular.]

"As you wish."

Tatsuya and Miyuki bowed towards the camera.

[There is something I need to inform you of, on my side.]

After the both of them looked up, Maya began explaining.

Apparently, they were about to receive a new mission. Thinking so, Tatsuya adopted the posture of someone listening with attention.

[Regarding the matter of the notification to the Magic Association about your engagement, it seems like we have received a formal protest from the Ichijou Family.]

“Oba-sama, why would the Ichijou Family do something like this?”

Even though Miyuki’s voice had remained calm on the surface, a strong resentment was hidden beneath it. Understanding this much wasn’t that hard for Tatsuya and Maya.

[It’s not easy to say but.]

While that might have been true, Maya didn’t keep it to herself and started explaining. It wasn’t because she was sensitive about Miyuki’s feelings that she hesitated, rather, it seemed like she was thoroughly enjoying the sight of Miyuki struggling to keep her emotions in check.

[The Ichijou Family’s argument is that the blood ties are too close. The talent of a Magician is a property of the Nation, it would do no good to have the next generation plagued by genetic abnormalities.]

“Such.”

“Surely this isn’t all there is to it.”

Interrupting a Miyuki that was about to shout, Tatsuya presented Maya with a question.

“The prevention of future generations’ gene abnormalities is not a concern limited to Magicians. That is why the law might forbid

a marriage depending on the degree of kinship.”

[This might not be the only reason but it certainly makes up the largest portion of their objection.]

“Conversely, the Ten Master Clans shouldn’t have the power to question the validity of a lawful engagement. Surely the Ichijou Family had something else to say?”

Hearing Tatsuya’s point, Maya expressed a satisfied smile and nodded.

[It’s exactly as you said. As expected of Tatsuya-san.]

Tatsuya on the other hand didn’t express any satisfaction at being praised.

“Then, just what exactly did they say?”

[Well, that is... They proposed that their eldest son to become Miyuki-san’s betrothed.]

“Please decline!”

To Maya’s answer, Miyuki’s voice rose in a flash.

“Miyuki.”

[It’s alright, Tatsuya-san.]

Although Tatsuya was about to reprimand Miyuki for raising her voice like that, Maya showed tolerance towards her pleasant response.

[It is natural that Miyuki-san is angered. I also have a problem with the fact they replied with a notification of marriage with a marriage proposal of their own.]

“In that case, the rejection answer...?”

Miyuki expectantly asked this.

[No, not yet, Miyuki-san. I don’t plan on answering the Ichijou Family for a while.]

However, contrary to her expectations, Maya's answer was a subtle "No".

"If that is the case, won't our position suffer?"

Maya answered Tatsuya's question with a nod carrying the meaning of an "I know".

[I do not intend to leave it as is forever. That's why the two of you shouldn't worry about it too much, alright.]

"No imprudent moves, is it?"

[Indeed. You two just have to happily spend time together as usual.]

To Maya's sentence who emphasized the word "Happily",

"Oba-sama..."

Miyuki looked away with an embarrassed expression.

"Understood."

However, Tatsuya bowed towards the camera while keeping a serious expression.



Even though it was now the second day of the school semester, there was no change in the current life of Tatsuya and Miyuki at First High.

The other students hesitated to approach them, yet but they were unable to hide their curiosity. Oh well, this isn't the kind of situation that can get better in just a single day after all. — —It could easily get worse in a single day however.

Originally, Miyuki had a tendency of being idolized in First High.

Appearance, Ability, just because of those two traits of hers alone, she was hard to approach. And now, lineage was added to the mix. Not only her classmates and underclassmen but even

her upperclassmen were nervous in her presence.

On the other hand, the number of people who deep in their hearts felt “fear” towards Tatsuya were not just a few.

Fear. Horror. Anxiety. The kind of fear, dread and awe that an exceptional warrior would inspire.

And after they learned that Tatsuya was a part of “the” Yotsuba Family, these feelings were amplified. Getting closer is too scary and at the same time, they’re too afraid to completely ignore him. This contradiction made it look like they were being cold towards him.

The interest they bore towards them, of course, wasn’t only because of their youthful High School Student curiosity. Stars and Idols being the center of scandals was not something new. They couldn’t help being curious about the story of the siblings that had too good of a relationship, were later revealed to be cousins, got engaged and are, even now, still living together.

Before the start of morning classes. Soon after arriving at Class 1-C, Minami was encircled by a crowd of people who seemed to be mainly composed of girls.

“Like I said already, nothing has changed from before.”

Minami had been repeating this answer many times already since her arrival. Her responses sometimes varied between “They didn’t do such a thing” to “I am not allowed to respond to this” or even “Sorry, I can’t answer.”

“Eeh, but, you are together all day long right?”

“That means, when they’re going to sleep as well... right?”

A high-pitched shriek shot up from the crowd. Minami on the other hand emitted a discreet sigh.

“As I said already, Tatsuya-sama and Miyuki-sama never do these kinds of things.”

Despite the fact that Minami was well aware that they wouldn't listen, she kept answering faithfully. She did so because they might take her silence as consent otherwise.

Maybe her perseverance won out in the end because the next questions were different.

“By the way Sakurai-san, up until December you were calling the Shiba siblings ‘Tatsuya-niisama’ and ‘Miyuki-neesama’ right? Could it be, Sakurai-san is also a member of the Yotsuba Family?”

The chattering of the crowd that was around Minami stopped immediately. What would she answer? They were waiting with bated breath for her response.

“I have been addressing them this way until now because it was a direct order from Tatsuya-sama. I am, well, I have a debt towards the Yotsuba Family, so...”

Her original answer would have sounded too much like the truth that “she is a being dedicated to serve the Yotsuba Family” so she hurriedly changed it. However, due to this, she stumbled during her explanation, this really betrayed the given impression that “she’s hiding something”.

“Hmm, really?”

“It is the truth.”

Because it was a fact that she was lying, even the voice that she used to refute the others' doubts was pretty weak. If she had raised her voice and used a strong denying tone, it might have been easier to deceive the students.

“Eh... So the Yotsuba Family also does these kinds of things.”

There are plenty of dangerous things in a Magician's work. It wasn't that unusual to hear reports of Magician's sons and daughters dying while performing their work or accomplishing

their duties. In First High. No, in this very Class-C classroom, there have been such cases already. That was the reason there wasn't any particularly awkward reaction at Minami's "they helped me" explanation.

"However, since you actually received help from the Yotsuba Family, that means you can't be considered to have no relation whatsoever with them right?"

"That may be the case but was it natural to investigate by directly asking the concerned person persistently?"

"No, not really..."

"Alright everyone, the lesson will begin pretty soon! If you don't go back to your seat as soon as possible you might lose a few points on your evaluation scores."

The person who had just saved Minami from the very inconsiderate questions from her classmates was the person who was pretty much the leading figure of this class.

"Saegusa-san? But we still have some time."

To Kasumi who had loudly interrupted the questioning from the back, a single female student had a look at her terminal to confirm the hour and answer back.

"The lesson will begin pre-tty soon right?"

However Kasumi countered her complaint by repeating the exact same phrase with a smile.

"I-I guess."

It wasn't because what Kasumi said was correct, but rather, there wasn't a student who could resist the overpowering feeling that her smile gave off and thus, Minami's surroundings slowly cleared as students were returning to their seats in groups of two or three.

Kasumi folded her arms and saw off the remaining students before proudly sitting at her own seat.

“Um, Saegusa-san. Thank you very much.”

Minami expressed her gratitude to her back.

“Don’t mention it. I hate these kinds of things too.”

Kasumi turned her head towards Minami and winked.



During recess time Minami managed to avoid being the center of the usual crowd. However that was only because second period was a practical class and they couldn't do that while moving towards the classroom. Unfortunately, it wouldn't be that easy to dodge during lunch break. The number of classmates who thought this would be the best time to talk freely weren't just one or two.

More than half of Class-C stood up as soon as the bell rang to signal the end of the morning classes.

"Sakurai-san, you're going to the Student Council Room right? Let's go together."

However, the one who was the fastest in inviting her was Kasumi.

In a sense, it was a natural result since the seating arrangements for the First Year's was the traditional gender-based syllabic order. Kasumi's family name was, of course, "Saegusa" while Minami's was "Sakurai". In other words, Kasumi's seat was just in front of Minami. So it was indeed natural that, given everyone reacted at the same time, Kasumi would be the first to reach her.

"Ah... Yes."

Minami was slightly surprised at this sudden conversation. Her surprise was understandable, after all, despite the fact they had been classmates for nine months now, it was the very first time that Kasumi directly invited her somewhere.

Kasumi didn't have anything against Minami herself. Since she was a close acquaintance of Tatsuya's however, she kind of avoided her up until now. And suddenly, this happened. Minami wasn't the only one who was surprised.

"Come on, let's go."

Being urged on by Kasumi, Minami reached the bag that contained her bento-box in a bit of a panic and stood up from her seat.

“Well, Saegusa-san.”

They were headed towards the stairs leading to the Student Council Room when Minami matched Kasumi’s pace and started up a conversation, her expression was that of someone who had a few questions.

“Hmm, what is it?”

After stealing a glance at Minami, Kasumi replied with a curt question.

“Just like this morning, thank you very much for what you did. However, may I ask why you are helping me.”

Up until now Kasumi never gave Minami any reason to think she disliked her, but it’s not like she gave her any reason to think she liked her either. That certainly wasn’t just an impression on Minami’s part. It was a fact that there had never been any degree of conversation above the expected minimum between the two classmates. Minami herself never really tried to proactively talk to Kasumi, hence why she still couldn’t understand the reason behind her actions.

“I told you before. That I hate these kinds of things.”

The smile that Kasumi turned towards Minami seemed a little awkward.

The reason was that being openly told by someone who you aren’t well acquainted with to begin with, “you helped me”, was a little too much for Kasumi, in other words she was shy.

“I know how these sort of things feel like. They likely don’t have any bad intentions, they’re just satisfying their curiosity, but

they can get pretty insensitive sometimes.”

“You’re right.”

Minami wasn’t hurt because of the barrage of inconsiderate questions in itself but by the fact that there were a lot of questions she couldn’t answer due to her position. Still, since she also wanted the other side to take her feelings into account, she couldn’t help but nod at Kasumi’s words.

“Sigh. I also have had quite a few bad experiences.”

Minami understood that she was trying to cheer her up. Kasumi unintentionally referred to herself using “Boku^[1]”, something she had never done at school.

Kasumi didn’t notice her blunder.

When it reached her ears, Minami was a bit taken aback, due to her training as a servant however she managed to keep a straight face.



Saturday, January 12th, it was the first weekend since the beginning of the new school semester.

Even though the classes on Saturday were only in the morning, the dining hall was still left open for the students with Club activities and members of the Committee. Erika, Leo and Mizuki had Club activities while Mikihiko had his duties as a member of the Disciplinary Committee, they all gathered in the dining room to prepare for the afternoon.

Compared to a month ago, the number of people present during their lunch break had been halved. Since Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Honoka were members of the Student Council they should be having lunch in the Student Council Room—though in Tatsuya and Miyuki’s case, it seems that since the beginning of the new school semester until yesterday they had taken their lunch in

secret in another classroom. This is what information Erika had heard from Shizuku.

The reason there wasn't much of a conversation at their table wasn't only because of their decreased number. The usual mood-maker, Erika, her expression and her every gesture were practically oozing of irritation.

Maybe Mikihiko thought it was best to quickly disperse, he finished his lunch in a hurry and was about to stand up from his seat.

"Miki, wait for a bit."

However, Erika who forced him to sit down again stopped his movement dead in its tracks.

"What is it."

In order to hide his trembling due to his escape attempt being found out, he answered with a strong voice.

"Wait until Mizuki finishes her lunch."

Of course, Erika wasn't the type to back down that easily. The one who tremblingly calmed down the two's arguing was Mizuki.

In the end, Mizuki put down her chopsticks on her plate which still had about a third of its original contents left.

Currently, the four of them were sitting in the following order, Erika and Mizuki were next to each other while Leo was in front of Erika.

Erika directed a sharp voice towards Mikihiko, who was sitting diagonally from her.

"Miki, just what are you doing exactly?"

"What do you mean."

Mikihiko once again answered in a strong tone however, his voice was unnaturally stiff.

“I see, so you won’t understand unless I say it directly? In that case I will!”

Erika’s swung her palm down on the table.

She paid no attention whatsoever to the numerous stares that turned towards her due to the loud sound she had just made.

“I’m asking you why the hell are you avoiding Tatsuya-kun!”

The dining room instantly became silent. Everyone’s gazes were concentrated on Erika and Mikihiko. While Erika could ignore the others’ stares, Mikihiko didn’t have such composure.

“I’m not really... avoiding him or anything.”

“Huh? So you’re gonna play dumb?”

Mikihiko faltered in the face of the fire that was in Erika’s eyes.

“It’s obvious that you’re avoiding Tatsuya-kun, even to this idiot over here.”

The person Erika was pointing to with her finger was Leo.

“Who are you calling an idiot! ...Putting that aside, Mikihiko. It’s just as this tomboy is sayi—”

After having said that, Leo suddenly let out a scream.

“Ouch! You...! You have something on your shoe!”

“Don’t worry, it’s not an iron tip or anything like that.”

If you were to ask what just happened, it seems like Erika kicked Leo’s leg under the table.

The atmosphere loosened a little. For Mizuki and Mikihiko, this wasn’t that rare of an occurrence.

“Sigh... Somehow I feel exhausted.”

This allowed them to take a breather before going right back in, even for Erika, this had been convenient.

“Oh well. Miki, to be honest, I don’t even want to hear why you’re avoiding Tatsuya-kun. However, if it’s just because Tatsuya-kun is from the Yotsuba Family, then it’s not a reason to avoid him like you do. If you think it is, then there is no point in calling yourself his friend.”

Erika quietly stared at Mikihiko in the eyes. It was because Erika had been so aggressive that Mikihiko had been obstinate a few moments before. However, with such sincere eyes turned towards him, the guilt that he felt deep inside didn’t allow him to feign ignorance anymore.

“...It’s not because he’s a member of the Yotsuba Family. No, to be honest that is one of the reasons. Rather I resent Tatsuya for not telling any of us sooner.”

Despite saying that he was resenting him, the expression that Mikihiko wore was one of regret.

Erika and Leo instinctively looked at each other.

“Wait a second, Mikihiko. Don’t you think it’s a bit wrong?”

Leo kept on talking to a Mikihiko that couldn’t look at him in the eyes.

“Don’t you think Tatsuya felt bad being forced to hide this from us? You should understand better than anyone that this was some kind of tradition he had to abide to right?”

“Miki.”

Erika sent a sharp voice flying towards a Mikihiko that still didn’t show any reaction to Leo’s words.

“Let’s assume you had heard of this directly from Tatsuya-kun, what would’ve changed?”

Mikihiko was at a loss for words. No, even if he tried to answer back he was unable to form a coherent response. Using this opportunity, Erika pressed even further.

“If you had heard this from Tatsuya-kun directly, do you think it’d have ended with a simple “Oh, I see”? Do you think you’d have been able to hang out like before? Looking at the way you reacted to this affair, I really don’t think that’s the case.”

Mikihiko couldn’t answer back. He couldn’t even come up with a makeshift lie.

“In other words, Miki, you’re just afraid of the Yotsuba name.”

“...What about you Erika.”

Mikihiko finally abandoned the tough act he was putting on until now.

Taking a defiant attitude, he answered back at Erika with a somewhat pouting voice.

However, that was a silly question.

“What do you think, of course I’m terrified.”

For Erika, bluffing about her own weaknesses was something she simply couldn’t do.

“He’s a member of that Yotsuba Family. If we ever found someone who wasn’t afraid after hearing that, he’d just be a gigantic fool. We’re way past the limits of the things you can just hear about for the first time and be done with it.”

“Then how can you just keep going on like nothing happened!?”

“Isn’t it obvious, it’s because we’re friends.”

Erika answered his question wearing the exact same expression that she had when she admitted that she was afraid earlier.

“The Yotsuba Family is scary. No one knows what they do and it makes me uneasy. But still, Tatsuya-kun is my friend. Even if I don’t trust the Yotsuba Family, I trust Tatsuya-kun. And that holds true even if there are a lot of things he needs to hide.”

Erika was stared at Mikihiko in the eyes and delivered the

finishing blow.

“To begin with, there are things Miki hides from us as well, and they’re not limited to a mere 10 or 20 things either.”

“That’s...”

“I won’t let you say that it’s not the case. We’ve been hanging out for a long time after all.”

“.....”

“It goes for me as well. Things I don’t want you guys to know, things that I absolutely don’t plan on sharing with you, there are a lot.”

Mikihiko looked away awkwardly. The reason was, he actually had an idea as to what her “things she doesn’t want known” was referring to.

“There were things he couldn’t share with us? Well of course, we’re not married or anything, so isn’t it actually normal.”

Mikihiko looked away dejectedly. As he was right now, he didn’t have any excuses left.

“How come... Erika and Leo were able to find so quickly the correct way to deal with all of this?”

Outside of Mikihiko’s field of view, Erika stole a glance at Leo.

“I guess that’s because I’ve never faced a Yotsuba. I don’t even know how dangerous Yotsuba Magicians are. However, I know Tatsuya.

Despite knowing how dangerous Tatsuya can be, I also know that I can trust him to the end.”

Leo felt embarrassed at his own speech and forced a clumsy smile before continuing.

“Well, it might be a misunderstanding. Though I figured it out on my own. I understand why he was keeping silent about it and

above all, I trust Tatsuya because he's my friend. Letting this 'possibility' ruin our relationship would be stupid."

"Leo... you're an amazing guy."

Mikihiko wasn't the only one watching Leo with an amazed expression.

Erika was the same. When she caught Mikihiko's eyes turning towards her she hurriedly regained her composure.

"Was it the same for you Erika?"

"Not exactly... Even I wasn't able to immediately come out with the appropriate reaction. However, I didn't need to dwell on it for three or four days."

Erika learned about Tatsuya's lineage in February of last year. Even if she was aware of that fact, the shock she received was exactly the same as the others. However, even if their situations were different, Erika managed to recover from the mental damage in less than a day.

If Erika hadn't suffered the same kind of shock then it would have been impossible for her to understand Mikihiko's dilemma to this extent, that's what he thought. However, he couldn't come to terms with the fact that while he had been indecisive, she had overcome the trauma.

"...I see."

Mikihiko shut his eyes and ceased all movement. His posture didn't have the serenity of someone meditating, but the suffering of an internal conflict.

"...I understand."

After opening his eyes, Mikihiko reported so to Erika.

"I also think of Tatsuya as a friend. I will do my best. On Monday of next week, everything will be settled."

Mikihiko's expression seemed a little refreshed.

Erika smiled with satisfaction, she then turned her eyes towards the nearby Mizuki.

“Mizuki, this goes for you as well.”

“Eh!?”

Mizuki's reaction wasn't that of someone who had just been suddenly greeted, rather, it was as if she had just dodged a spear by a hair's breadth.

“You must stop treating Miyuki and Tatsuya-kun so coldly. Even Miki said he'd do his best, so you should be able to do it as well, right?”

“Hmm...”

“You-can-do-it-too, right?”

“Y-Yes... Understood! I will do something about it!”

Erika forcefully pressed the indecisive-looking Mizuki.

“Shibata-san, I will do my best as well. Let's do it together.”

To answer Mikihiko's words of encouragement,

“...Yes! Let's do our best.”

Mizuki cheerfully nodded.

Admonishing Mikihiko in front of Mizuki had been Erika's plan. Erika expected Mizuki to be difficult to persuade if she had tried to do it alone, that's why she first made Mikihiko promise to amend his relationship with Tatsuya, to get her to do the same.

The result was just as she had predicted.

However, as she had planned, faced with the two people who (mentally held their hands in encouragement, Erika showed an “I can't stand this” expression and turned her head away.



Due to Erika's (and Leo, a little) persuasiveness, Mikihiko and Mizuki decided to abandon their current attitude towards Tatsuya and Miyuki.

However, fighting her feelings wasn't that easy for Honoka.

She had already decided how she would act towards Tatsuya in the future. However, she had yet to muster the courage to actually do it, not to mention how she should act towards Miyuki.

Honoka honestly thought of Miyuki as a friend.

However, at the same time, she was a strong rival in love. Moreover, she was leading by two or three steps already.

After being admonished by Shizuku, she no longer cared about the fact Tatsuya and Miyuki had deceived her. After all, it seemed like Tatsuya and Miyuki themselves had been deceived.

Still, it wasn't possible for Honoka to smile at them like before. Due to Honoka's behavior, Miyuki herself didn't know how to act and the atmosphere had become awkward between them, it was a vicious cycle.

Even now, Honoka was running away from the Student Council Room and was heading towards the Club Management's Headquarters. Honoka was the Student Council Treasurer. Allowing a supplementary budget to the various Clubs was part of her job. As such, there wasn't anything strange in her visiting the Club Management's Headquarters. However even if the people in her surroundings didn't think it was strange—she herself knew that she was just avoiding Miyuki. The fact she was actually aware of that fact depressed her even more.

The current head of the Club Management Group was in the same club as Honoka, an acquaintance of hers since their first year, his name was Igarashi. A boy whose temperament was a

subtle balance of gentleness and timidity. There was a saying that went “He’s neither sugar nor salt” though in Igarashi’s case, you could definitely say that he was sugar.

He wasn’t to Honoka’s taste but in her current emotional state, he was an agreeable partner. He had become a suitable person to speak to when she wanted a change of mood.

“Excuse me. It’s Mitsui from the Student Council.”

“Please, you may enter.”

After she reported her visit through the interphone, the answer didn’t come from the speakers, the door opened and she was directly invited in.

The student who had come out was the first year Shippou Takuma.

Even though, at first, there had been a lot of bad rumors about him from his classmates, his attitude greatly changed near the end of April.

His self-assertiveness was just as strong as usual, however he did not feel the need to push it anymore.

His ambitions and desire of taking over leadership was still present, however taking a good look at him, you could notice that his former complacent attitude had for the most part, totally vanished.

Well, to begin with, his hot-blooded nature couldn’t be easily changed but he had come to a point where he could honestly apologize and reflect if you pointed out his mistakes.

Above all, anyone could tell that he was putting in the effort to “change” and “grow up”, he thus garnered the sympathy and even trust from his classmates.

It had accumulated to a point where during the Nine Schools Competition, he had spontaneously become the manager of the

nine first years registered on First High's team.

Without any arrogance, he steadily increased his abilities. As of today, not only his classmates but also various seniors openly recognized his efforts.

Honoka as well bore ill will towards Takuma at first, after the incident with Tatsuya. However, right now, she didn't have a bad impression of him. She could humbly recognize that he was a promising junior.

"Excuse me, I had an appointment with President Igarashi."

"With the President? There was a call just a few moments ago and he had to go out."

Honoka reported that she would be coming over just before going out of the Student Council Room. However, it seems like some sort of trouble had risen. Even though the former President Hattori's efforts had been concentrated on abolishing the stigma that only top students could attain important posts, Igarashi seemed to have had a negative effect on peoples' attitudes.

Honoka thought it would be great if that was just a coincidence. Even though she shouldn't be one to worry about others' situation considering her own mental state, this was undeniably her good nature speaking. In that respect, Honoka couldn't really complain about Igarashi.

"Was it urgent business?"

While Honoka thought it couldn't be helped and started to go back, she was stopped by Takuma's voice.

"Yes but since he's not present I thought I would come back later."

"Wait a moment please."

Was Takuma in charge of the communications, rather he took the wireless headset that had a microphone attached. It was a

device that had integrated brain wave assistance. He put on the headset and turned towards the desktop terminal.

“This is Headquarters, Shippou speaking. ...Mitsui-san from the Student Council is here. ...Yes, understood. I will transmit the message.”

Takuma took off the headset and stood up, he then turned towards Honoka.

“Mitsui-senpai, the President asked me to tell you to wait, if possible, as he is on his way.”

“On his way... How long will it take?”

“He wasn’t that precise but if we take past examples into account, I would say about five minutes.”

Five minutes was roughly the amount of time it would take her to go back to the Student Council Room. Since she didn’t really want to go back there yet, Honoka decided to go along with Takuma’s recommendation and wait.

(Still, these days, I did nothing but out of office work, the desk work must have been accumulating...) However, it was especially when she wasn’t doing anything that Honoka unintentionally cornered herself the most. This too, was because of her nature.

(It would probably end in the blink of an eye if Tatsuya-san were to help... Though I can’t ask him, it would definitely be awkward...) (But, Miyuki is sure to handle the task... Even without me saying anything, and if she was to ask for Tatsuya-san’s help... Then, won’t they think that I am unneeded!?) Honoka made her face go pale by herself.

“Um... Mitsui-senpai, are you feeling unwell?”

If you were to look at her from the outside, then eight or nine times out of ten you’d reach that conclusion. Even if you were someone as self-centered as Takuma.

“Eh!?”

However, in her current state, of course the meaning of that question would fly over Honoka’s head. In the first place, she wasn’t so much thinking as she was being caught up in intense delusions, she wasn’t the type to be able to shelve these sort of thoughts instantly when someone interrupted her.

“Really, it’s nothing.”

Still, this reaction, no matter how you looked at it was just a bluff.

Takuma thought so as well.

And in his mind, he even added his own explanation.

“Mitsui-senpai, how should I say this...”

“Yes?”

“Um... I fully understand that this is none of my business but, about the matter with Shiba-senpai...”

“Wait a moment, Shippou-kun? Just what are you talking about?”

A flustered Honoka tried to stop the words coming out of Takuma’s mouth.

However, even if Takuma was wrong about Honoka’s condition, he certainly wouldn’t misunderstand the reason for her depressed attitude.

It was precisely because he was right that Honoka was flustered. What Takuma was about to say, Honoka didn’t want to hear it.

“I think you should give up on Shiba-senpai.”

Despite that, Takuma had said it.

“Stop!”

“But at this rate, Senpai will suffer from it!”

Takuma had changed his attitude these days, his behavior had greatly improved. Still, he hadn't given up on his ambition just yet. He still had hope that as a promising Magician, by making Honoka his ally, he could get close to Shizuku eventually.

But above all, Takuma was attracted to Honoka.

It happened the day Takuma and Kasumi had gone overboard, which ended up with a fight between the Saegusa twins and himself. A lot of people had rebuked him, Honoka however had stretched a helping hand towards him. Speaking objectively, the only thing she did at the time was lean on him and ask “Can you stand?”, it wasn't as if she had lent him her hand or anything.

What started with the one-sided embellishment of that memory hadn't yet bloomed into fully romantic feelings. They didn't really have many occasions to talk to each other either so that description was appropriate.

Though today, by chance, the two of them were all alone, and coincidentally, he also witnessed Honoka's distress due to her unanswered feelings. You could say that Takuma short-circuited, he was running wild.

“Senpai! I'm-!”

Honoka closed her eyes and covered her ears with her hands.

Takuma stretched his arm towards Honoka's hands.

“Shippou, what are you doing...?”

However, that was as far as he would go. The voice of President Igarashi, who had just arrived at the Headquarters, stopped Takuma's rampage.

Igarashi was not alone. Shizuku walked out abruptly from behind him and stopped in front of Honoka, she buried Honoka's head in her chest.

“Shizuku...?”

“Yeah.”

Shizuku gently patted Honoka’s back several times to tell her that everything was alright now.

The stiffness left Honoka’s body.

Shizuku turned cold eyes towards Takuma while still holding Honoka.

“What were you saying?”

The tone of her voice was fitting for the look she was giving him.

“Well, that’s...”

Takuma had intended to finish his sentence that started with “I’m-” by saying “I’m worried about you!”.

“Trying to seduce someone when they’re feeling down, you’re the worst.”

Shizuku had accused him. Still, it wasn’t entirely wrong.

The reason Takuma wasn’t able to answer was certainly because he himself was conscious of that.

“Let’s go, Honoka?”

Shizuku took Honoka out of the Club Management’s Headquarters.

No word of protest came out of Takuma’s mouth.

Igarashi, who had come to fulfill his promise, could do nothing but stand there dumbfounded.



That day, Honoka didn’t return to her house. As usual they were coming home from school separately from Tatsuya and Miyuki, when they arrived at the station Honoka was ordered by

Shizuku to stay at her house.

She didn't even ask if she was okay with it. It was a unilateral decision.

It's not like staying at Shizuku's house was unpleasant or anything. She was aware of her own current indecisiveness and if she was left alone she would probably feel depressed very quickly, that is why Shizuku's invitation was welcomed.

She had dinner with Shizuku's parents, who had hurried back home, and as usual they stepped in the bath together. However, once there, the usual chattering didn't come out.

What differed from usual was the fact that Shizuku took Honoka to her room afterwards.

Honoka had her own room in the Kitayama Family's house. Although it was just a guest room on paper, the reality was that this was a room for her use only. The interior matched Honoka's tastes and you could even find her underwear in the closet.

Though aside from that, there wasn't much Honoka herself used in this room. When Honoka stayed overnight, she would usually hang around in Shizuku's room, and even sleep there in fact. Today however, Shizuku took her towards "Honoka's Room".

Honoka obediently sat on her bed, compared to just a few moments ago however, while she had been wearing a happy expression during dinner, a grim, painful one now floated on her face.

Shizuku sat in front of her.

She kneeled on the floor seiza-style.

Of course, sitting on the bed, Honoka's face was higher. Shizuku looked at the downcast, pained face of Honoka directly.

"Honoka."

“I know...”

Honoka tried to escape Shizuku’s look by looking even more downwards.

“You’re probably pitying me right now...”

With a trembling voice that threatened to turn into sobbing any minute, Honoka said so.

“Even though I’m completely fine.”

“But, you’re making such a face.”

“Eh...?”

Honoka lifted her head.

Shizuku’s stare hadn’t changed from the time she sat on the floor, it was still fixed on Honoka.

“Honoka, this entire week you wore such an expression.”

“What kind of expression...?”

“A crestfallen one.”

Honoka couldn’t help but gape in shock.

“It can’t be...”

“Even worse than Shippou’s.”

Without holding anything back, Shizuku pointed that out.

“Everyone in your surroundings who’s looked at you has said the same.”

“I don’t want that! I don’t want others to take pity on me!”

“It doesn’t matter what Honoka thinks. They’re thinking like that for their own good.”

Shizuku, firmly grasped both of Honoka’s hands away from covering her eyes, and she stared straight into her eyes.

“They’re showing sympathy because they pity you, but doing so, they can reassure themselves that they’re not miserable.”

“I’m... I’m not miserable!”

“Hmm.”

Shizuku nodded at the words Honoka managed to squeeze out.

Honoka matched Shizuku’s gaze by her own volition.

“I know that Honoka isn’t miserable. It’s just that everyone else doesn’t know that.”

Shizuku had been looking at nothing but Honoka this entire time.

“They don’t know about Honoka’s determination. They don’t know that Honoka is strong.”

Honoka nodded with her eyes.

“That’s because Honoka didn’t show them that she wasn’t miserable.”

Shizuku released her hands and stood up.

“Honoka.”

This time, it was Shizuku who was looking from above.

“Monday.”

Honoka inhaled with a serious expression on her face.

“Show me that there’s no reason for anyone to pity you.”

Without waiting for either a “Yes” or a “No” from Honoka, Shizuku left the room.



Sunday, January 13th. Tatsuya was going to FLT. The CAD Development Center, in other words the Third Division, wasn’t particularly different from usual despite today being a holiday.

Even though as its name suggests, this place is mainly about CAD Development, Tatsuya wasn't currently working on developing a CAD nor a software related to CADs.

He was working on his Stellar Furnace, the energy providing resource, the design for the model plant of non-military Magic usage.

The company wasn't aware that Tatsuya started making such a thing.

Mainly because he didn't report about it. After all, Tatsuya wasn't exactly an employee of FLT, he was a researcher currently under contract. Meaning, aside from confidentiality clauses he had to respect, he had quite a bit of freedom.

Due to his position, Tatsuya benefitted from a private room at his disposition in the Third Division, so if he really wanted to do things secretly it was doable. Even Ushiyama, who is considered the second half of Taurus Silver, wasn't aware of it yet.

Nevertheless, the other members' attitudes never changed.

"Ah, good morning Young Master."

"Young Master, good morning."

While heading towards his private room, many people greeted Tatsuya.

They were already aware of his identity as a member of the Yotsuba Family. That was because Tatsuya had already gathered all of them and publicly made that revelation known earlier this year.

Still, their attitude didn't change and they addressed him as usual "Young Master". It seems like positions in the Third Division attracted people who turned their backs on authority, so it's not surprising that learning he was part of the Yotsuba Family didn't trigger any reaction beyond the "What of it".

Thanks to that, he could concentrate on his plans for his own project.

The non-military Magic Usage Project (Extract both useful and harmful Substances from the Coastal Area of the Pacific using Electricity generated by the Stellar-generator), construction plan “ESCAPES”. It was the “means of escape” for Magicians from their fate as living weapons.

At first, this Project was made as a means to “escape” from the Yotsuba Family’s influence and provide him with the means of living afterwards.

Even though his motives were now slightly different as a part of the head family of the Yotsuba, it didn’t change the fact that it would be a large advancement for the non-military applications of magic. With the nuclear fusion reactor operated by magic, stable electricity and fuel can be produced. Moreover an important position in the industrial society can be secured just with the by-product of supplying mineral resources from the Sea. As a result, Magicians will be able to provide for themselves without being forced into the Military. That was the baseline thinking behind his project.

The current sources of electrical power were natural energy such as the heat from sunlight, the force of the wind, the biomass. — — As a result of increased reliance on such renewable energy, modern industries had become extremely dependent on weather conditions.

Of course, this was much preferable to a society dependent on fossil energy and nuclear fission energy. Especially for long-term development, it was crucial for mankind to actively protect the environment. However, it was undeniable that this provoked an unstable fuel delivery situation. The system behind orbital satellites equipped with photovoltaic solar panels was also one of the projects destined to lower this reliance on weather conditions

for energy supply.

The rough outline of Tatsuya's Stellar Furnace was composed of four crucial points: The furnace itself produces Electricity. It then uses this electrical power and from its high temperatures creates hydrogen gas by electrolysis. Thus again using the electrical power of the furnace, fresh water is produced using reverse osmosis on sea water. The leftovers from the previous operation are thus highly concentrated sea water, in which useful resources as well as toxic substances can be extracted.

Although, Tatsuya's knowledge of industrial technology stayed at a High School Student level. It wouldn't do any good to not cooperate with specialists for matters other than the Stellar Furnace itself. Even though the manufacturing of hydrogen gas and collection of all usable resources in sea water could be done directly with Magic, the responsibilities of Magicians would be too consequent. Using Magicians as part of the engineering process itself would be mistaking the means for the end, moreover it wasn't what Tatsuya desired.

(The ones who should approach the non-Magic Community should be the Magic Community itself. It will be easier to find partners if the Yotsuba name is used, moreover the opposition from the Magic Association will be avoided. So the problem will lie in making concrete arrangements.) The groundwork was already completed. The conceptual plans for the Stellar Furnace should be ready within 3 months, the baseline design could be expected within half a year. From then on, even Tatsuya had to admit that he would need cooperation.

(It might be a little too fast considering I'm still only a High School Student...) He wouldn't be able to find anyone willing to participate due to his young age. That was Tatsuya's greatest cause for concern at the moment.

Chapter 3

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Wednesday morning, the second week of the new semester.

“Good morning.”

Having entered Class 2-E, Tatsuya received the morning’s greeting from Mizuki, who sat beside him as before.

“Good morning, Mizuki.”

Mizuki answered Tatsuya’s reciprocation with a smile. Except, her smile was a bit awkward.

It would have been rather suspicious if she gave a natural smile, Tatsuya thought without a hint of doubt.

He felt blessed that his friends would strain themselves nonchalantly trying to smile.

There’s no mistaking, from Mizuki’s perspective at least, that she would prefer to keep her distance from a suspicious character such as himself, Tatsuya thought. Mizuki is not privy to the World of Magicians. She’s bound to dread the infamy of the Yotsuba Family more than one normally should. On top of that, here’s a suspicious character who’d been covering up his real identity for close to two years now. Even then, a normal girl like Mizuki has been trying to connect with him as a friend. Tatsuya is not irritated about this, rather he’s come to think it’s normal.

He approached his own seat while wearing a faint smile on his lips.

A sound echoed from the windows to the hallway that were right beside Tatsuya as he took his seat.

“Good morning, Tatsuya-kun.”

“Good morning, Erika.”

It was Erika who spoke to him from the other side of the window. She wasn't with Leo today, but Tatsuya didn't point this out. He remembered the last time when Erika had gotten mad at him for treating them like a couple. Besides, it's not like Erika and Leo were dating.

Them not being together was not something strange in particular.

“Good morning to you as well, Mizuki.”

“Good morning, Erika-chan.”

Erika gleefully nodded her head with a satisfied smile akin to a bright day in spring, no less than what Mizuki would normally do.

With that smile alone, Tatsuya could tell that Erika's meddling was intended to cheer Mizuki up. Even so, “What's the matter, Erika? You seem energetic.”

Tatsuya dared to ask.

“Eh, it's nothing.”

Erika returned an answer that Tatsuya had expected.



With the afternoon classes having ended, Miyuki got up from her seat and turned toward the Practical Building where Tatsuya was waiting.

The Practical Building also had a meeting room for mass

fighting instruction.

And so, a week passed with them having lunch at a specific time to try and avoid attention. It had been pleasant for Miyuki to be alone with Tatsuya, but she felt lonely when she reminded herself of their relationship.

“Miyuki.”

Miyuki suddenly heard her name called from behind her, and she dashed onwards thinking she shouldn't make Tatsuya wait.

“Honoka, what's the matter?”

Honoka let out a noise.

Her face was stiff with tension.

Miyuki, despite wearing an unchanging expression this whole time, was also tense. It had been almost a week since her last exchange with Honoka that didn't have to do with work.

No, tense would be better applied to the state of Class 2-A who had fixed their eyes upon the two girls, making no sound.

“Oh, this must be about that thing later this afternoon, right? Shall we go to the Student Council Room?”

Miyuki had been unable to instantly craft a response. She wanted to make amends with Honoka, but she didn't fathom that Honoka would meet her halfway.

“Would it be alright if I went along with you?”

Shizuku raised her voice from the side before it turned into an awkward situation where Miyuki's silence could be interpreted as her refusal. That single utterance from Shizuku was hospitably received by both Miyuki and Honoka.

“Alright, go ahead.”

Miyuki wore a small yet bright smile and nodded to Honoka and Shizuku.

Miyuki, Honoka and Shizuku had already made it to their seats by the time Tatsuya, who was contacted through his mobile terminal, had entered the Student Council Room.

Neither of the girls had picked up their chopsticks yet. Miyuki hadn't opened the lid of her bento box; Honoka and Shizuku hadn't gotten anything in front of themselves yet either.

“Onii-sama, thank you for waiting.”

“Tatsuya-san, go ahead. Please, over here.”

Miyuki and Honoka stood up to guide Tatsuya to his seat. It was located beside Miyuki's and in front of Honoka's. Shizuku also stood up, but she went to the dining server and took out trays for two which had been warming on standby.

The four congenially started to eat. It was just Honoka and Shizuku who offered topics for conversation at the dining table, while Tatsuya and his sister never brought themselves to break the ice. It felt like Honoka and Shizuku were avoiding having a conversation about the Yotsuba Family.

It was Tatsuya and Miyuki returning their bento boxes to their valises that broke the calm atmosphere. This was after Honoka and Shizuku had returned the trays to the dining server's inlet, and Miyuki distributed tea to everyone.

“Miyuki.”

Standing up, her voice and expression betraying her stress, Honoka raised her voice.

“What is it?”

Miyuki, too, shed her smile and looked up at Honoka with a serious face.

Shizuku gazed at the two of them intently from Honoka's side.

Tatsuya, too, silently observed the situation from Miyuki's side.

“Umm... Umm... I...”

Honoka was wringing out words with a frantic expression.

Miyuki, while waiting, had never averted her eyes from Honoka's.

“I won't give up!”



Miyuki, Tatsuya and Shizuku turned to Honoka. To ascertain Honoka's intentions, and to see Honoka's resolve with their own eyes.

"I will not give up on Tatsuya-san!"

Honoka successfully spoke her feelings without faltering, even with everyone's eyes fixated on her.

"I will not yield."

Miyuki responded without a moment's delay.

She then courtly stood up and held her right hand out to Honoka.

That hand was in a position that demanded it be shaken.

"I will definitely not be defeated."

Honoka gripped Miyuki's hand. Her competitive spirit was showing through her face.

Miyuki showed a smile. Though it was much more than just a "smile", it was the manifestation of her aggression and competitiveness.

Tatsuya tried to put on a bitter smile, but it failed miserably. The two women in front of him just declared rivalry over his affections. It was only natural that he would be dumbfounded in regards to what expression he should make.

Shizuku, on the other hand, was more expressionless than usual. No, since she was always bereft of changes in her expression, we can't say she was "now" expressionless. Rather, this time she deliberately rid herself of expression.

Speaking of one's true feelings, Shizuku hoped Honoka would immediately give up on Tatsuya. But Honoka chose the path of battling it out with Miyuki on her journey to Tatsuya's heart. She frowned at the thought that Honoka would choose such a harsh,

thorny path—a frown which Shizuku endured for dear life.



After school in the Student Council Room, things were progressing with the friendly attitude that existed before the announcement. Izumi and Minami noticed this minute change, but neither wanted to investigate into the reason why. They were relieved that the tense atmosphere had abated, which showed through their facial expressions and actions.

However, they weren't the type of people that would just act carefully.

That would put them in the minority in High School.

“Hey, Izumi. Doesn't the atmosphere feel sort of different from usual?”

Kasumi had come up the stairs since it was nearly time for the school gate to close. She had stealthily gotten close to Izumi— — and asked in a fairly loud voice.

“Is that so? Everything seems normal to me, Kasumi-chan.”

With a calm expression on her face, Izumi responded with an intensity that was difficult to oppose.

Sensing that she had somehow angered Izumi, despite not understanding why, Kasumi nodded lightly and dropped the subject.

“Huh? ...Uh, yeah.”

Having also just come up from the Public Morals Committee Headquarters, Mikihiko's reaction was slightly more guarded than Kasumi's.

“What's the matter?”

His reaction was even greater when hearing Tatsuya's voice,

“No, it's nothing.”

He was responding in the same way he had prior to Winter Break. — — It was different from last week.

Tatsuya had thought that Mikihiko got yelled at by Erika. Tatsuya thought so, but of course he didn't say this.

Despite that, he couldn't help the fact that his lips were trembling.

“What's the matter, Tatsuya? Did something good happen.”

“Yeah. But, it's nothing important.”

Yes, it was nothing important. It was definitely a “good thing.” For Miyuki, and for himself.

Having reached that conclusion, Tatsuya decided to change the mood.

“Moreover, show me today's report.”

“Alright. It's no problem if I show it to you while we're at school.”

Tatsuya quickly looked over the e-reader that Mikihiko gave him, and entered his hard key for the Student Association confirmation signature.

“Has some kind of trouble started outside of the school?”

Tatsuya asked as such when he returned the e-reader to Mikihiko.

Mikihiko had agreed to show him “at school” which had drawn Tatsuya's attention.

“Yes... after those candid photographs, the number of students following us has increased.”

“Stalkers?”

Unaware, this was the first time Tatsuya had heard of it. His hands had been full lately and he had eyes only for what was

directly around him.

“You could call them stalkers... it seems to be a ‘Humanist’ Organization.”

“You’re saying the students at this school have become the target of an anti-Magician organization?”

Tatsuya’s eyes glimmered sharply.

Mikihiko had also drawn the attention of Miyuki and Honoka as they were preparing to head home.

“It looks like no students have been threatened or assaulted yet. That being said, ever since the group formed, some students have reported being verbally abused.”

Mikihiko answered Tatsuya’s question in a provocative tone.

“Minami-chan.”

Returning to her designated President’s seat, Miyuki spoke to Minami.

“Yes, President.”

Minami stood up and moved to stand in front of Miyuki. However, Miyuki stopped her in place with her gaze.

“Regarding the case we heard from the Public Morals Committee Chairman, has the Student Council noticed it?”

“One moment please.”

In response to Miyuki’s question, Minami hit the switch on her desktop terminal that she had already shut down. Contrary to how information systems from half-a-century ago worked, it booted up near-instantly.

The operating system appeared on the screen immediately.

Minami entered a search term and then read out the results that were displayed.

“The number of people and events discussed at the Student Council includes 24 people spanning a total of 38 events. They’re already reporting these to the police, but there are no reports of any concrete crackdowns being reported.”

“They’re ignoring it!?”

Honoka had raised her voice as if to say “I can’t believe it” in response to the facts Minami had read out loud.

“They may be speaking rashly, but a crackdown would be difficult.”

Shizuku replied with a sigh.

“Despite the candid photographs, it’s difficult to present evidence of stalking.”

Mikihiko muttered irritably.

If it had been like the obvious enemy in the Yokohama Incident, they could easily counter-attack and crush them. But they had no way of counter-attacking a divided, vague attack coming from among the otherwise virtuous townspeople. If they raised a finger, they would be branded criminals. To begin with, they had no idea who the enemy was, or even how to defeat them.

“We should likely urge all students to be careful. Be on the lookout for any direct assaults and also be careful not to overreact at risk of appearing to be in the wrong. Or rather, so that you are not branded a criminal.”

“Understood. I will handle it immediately.”

Tatsuya had shown concern in response to Miyuki’s reaction.



Saturday, January 19th. The end of the second week of the new school term.

Morning lectures were over, and now it was time for club and

committee activities.

Kasumi and Izumi had previously dropped by the dining hall to replenish their energy. Izumi had wanted to eat lunch with Miyuki in the Student Council Room, but she couldn't resist Kasumi who had insisted on a whim "We should eat together once in a while."

Kasumi and Izumi were both popular among the Year 1 students. No, they also boasted high popularity with the Year 2 and 3 students, but they were especially popular people to the Year 1 group. The twins weren't the type to be very helpful so they couldn't form factions like the "Kasumi Army" or "Izumi Guard", but at the same time they were unrelated to any factional disputes so they were adored as though they were "Everyone's Idols". It left a stark contrast compared with Takuma who steadily formed the "Shippou Group" because of his outgoing assistance.

Kasumi and Izumi didn't normally have anybody in particular who followed them around so it wasn't difficult for them to keep to themselves. On the other hand, when it came to lunch, they had continually accumulated a group of Year 1 students with their lunch trays in hand.

What stood out about the two was that the students who came close to them were mostly girls. That said, boys weren't intimidated by them like they were by Miyuki, so the boys could express affection for them much like they would for a mascot.

For that reason, although they constantly had lots of people around them, not a single one would interrupt them when they were talking. Under these circumstances, the two of them engaged in unrestrained conversations while slurping their noodles.

Izumi ate, true to her proper image, but Kasumi also ate

carefully. She slowly cut her kakiage into bite-sized pieces and ate them with good manners. She never talked with food in her mouth which meant her pace was fairly slow. Without a doubt, this calm lunch scene made it hard to guess what they were talking about.

“In these last two or three days, the atmosphere at school has become really gloomy, hasn’t it.”

“Those rumors about Shiba-senpai and Miyuki-senpai? It’s going to be a real problem if senrou people like them run around making a fuss all the time.”

“...What’s does ‘senrou’ mean?”

“It means abject.”

“Ah, you mean they should keep their lowly curiosity in check and not make a fuss all the time, right?”

“If you want to be direct about it, yes.”

“Then you should have said that in the first place.”

“I don’t even call my classmates ‘lowly’, much less an upperclassman. I believe every student at this school are proper gentlemen and ladies.”

“I said the same thing you did, but you need to be less cruel, Izumi.”

“That isn’t true, Kasumi-chan. I simply think while nobody’s true character is ‘lowly’, occasionally they become delusional when obsessed with such base things.”

Izumi, having said that with an unruffled expression, picked up the rice bowl that she had placed on her tray. (Inside: the lunch menu has small/medium/large sizes for lunches.) “Well, I don’t think you should hide your real feelings with complicated words.”

Kasumi had quietly muttered this while Izumi was focused on her hands.

If she didn't let off any steam during conversations with Izumi, even though she knew her twin sister's true character, things would become too tense for her.

"Kasumi-chan, did you say something?"

But her timing had been a little too quick, and Izumi raised her face as she was putting her chopsticks in her rice bowl.

"No, I didn't say anything."

Kasumi said so, while picking up her rice bowl as Izumi had done.

Kasumi slurped her soba with a little more enthusiasm than Izumi. With her brows furrowed at her twin sister, Izumi also moved her chopsticks.

Having used her manners as a shield to redirect the conversation, Kasumi set her bowl down and spoke to Izumi as though nothing had happened.

"By the way, how do you feel about the Student Council Room? I only had a glance but it looks like they've made it peaceful again."

"Although they are only slightly different from us, I believe all involved parties are adults."

Izumi had answered Kasumi's question in a not-entirely-complimentary tone of voice.

"I think Mitsui-senpai in particular has a lot of good things about her... Miyuki-senpai and Shiba-senpai are both excellent at behaving themselves as well."

"Hmm... Well, the President has reined in how clingy she is with Shiba-senpai, and it looks like she's finally paying attention

to other people.”

Izumi had knit her face at the words “clingy”, but Kasumi was indisputably correct.

“No matter how close you are as friends, ignoring each other will cause you to drift apart for sure.”

“Even close friends have to be courteous, right?”

“Correct. Disregarding the fact that plenty of people lack that level of intimacy, rather, they look down on it, and prefer to amuse themselves by spreading irresponsible rumors. It can lead to an inevitable drop in the overall relationship.”

Izumi stopped for a moment, then added as though remembering something.

“At the utmost, that’s a general rule.”

Kasumi and Izumi’s classmates all hung their heads and huddled up.



Around the same time— —well, it was actually a fair amount of time thereafter— —the Magic University’s cafeteria was thronged with students.

Mixed among them are students who are visiting from the National Defense Academy’s “Special Warfare Research” course. Out of all these students, two girls were facing each other, a normal student and a magical officer trainee. There wasn’t a real difference in how the two students looked, just glancing them over wouldn’t help. The officer’s brilliant smile was making it difficult to tell if she was a normal or Magic University student.

“Hey Mari! You don’t have to laugh like that, do you?”

“Sorry. But still, him and you...”

Watanabe Mari, a visiting student and the former Chairwoman

of the First High School Disciplinary Committee, apologized as she continued to suppress her laughter. Opposite of her was Saegusa Mayumi, the former First High School Student Council President, her face blushing red and her eyes glaring into Mari's.

The blush on her face was not out of anger but of embarrassment. She glowered at Mari with teary eyes, yet they did not feel threatening at all.

“Hey!”

“No, I'm really sorry.”

In the end, it was Mayumi's sulking and turning away that made Mari stop laughing.

“Are you seriously telling me that the Head of the Saegusa Family wants to make you and Tatsuya-kun marry?”

“It's an engagement! Not marriage!”

Keeping her face averted and her arms crossed, Mayumi snapped at Mari's statement.

Mari suddenly asked herself how that was supposed be different, but she decided to keep those words to herself.

“Well then, why are we even talking about Mayumi and Tatsuya-kun's marriage?”

The Magic University is more flexible in regards to breaks and lunches than the National Defense Academy. At the same time, it's not like the students can have lunch as long as they want. Mari decided to move on to the main topic.

“You heard about it as well, Mari?”

This conversation was originally started by Mayumi, who wanted to voice her idle complaints. Still sulking, she realized that their respective breaks were almost over, and her face regained a serious expression.

“Is this about the Yotsuba Family? Well, I can’t say I expected it, but it’s also not that surprising.”

In this case, expecting and being surprised are two completely different things, but Mayumi did not press her to make up her mind. She felt the same way as Mari after all.

“How much did you know about this, Mari?”

“How much... Those siblings are actually cousins and direct descendants of the Yotsuba Family. And wasn’t Shiba appointed as the next Head of the Yotsuba Family and hasn’t Tatsuya-kun been engaged with Shiba? Isn’t that all there is to it?”

Mayumi closed her eyes and shook her head to Mari’s doubtful inquiry.

“That’s all that was publicized. There’s more to the story, you know.”

Mayumi leaned toward the table.

Having lured Mayumi, Mari brought her face closer.

“The day after the Yotsuba Family announced Tatsuya-kun and Miyuki-san’s engagement, the Ichijou Family raised their objection to the engagement.”

“Objection to the engagement?”

It was as if Mari’s face was asking, “Can they do that?” Mayumi hinted a forced smile.

“They said they’re too related by blood that there is a risk the marriage would harm magician genetics, which is an invaluable resource of the country.”

“They said ‘resource’ now?”

Mari looked stunned. This way of thinking, which is quite contentious even within the Ten Master Clans, would sound like a suspicious excuse by the Hundred Families to Magicians not in

the know.

Mari's conclusion is most likely correct. Rather, it's spot on. "Resource", in this context, is being used synonymously with property. Calling a person's genes "property" makes that person no different than livestock.

One wrong step could lead this whole situation into a dangerous political mess of placing genes above all else.

"I can never find myself to like that aspect of the Ten Master Clans."

"If I were to choose between saying whether I like it or not, I'd go for the latter, but this decision is for the greater good. Even so, I won't consent to them meddling with my private life, such as this whole engagement business."

"Is there anything else?"

As the topic approached the climax, Mayumi let out a sigh.

"The Ichijou Family raised their objection, citing close blood relations as their grounds. At the same time, they proposed Miyuki-san's engagement with their eldest son, Masaki-kun, to the Yotsuba Family."

"I don't know whether they're just shameless, or insensitive..."

Looking at Mari who had turned speechless, Mayumi shrugged her shoulders.

"But surely a marriage between Miyuki-san and Masaki-kun would be more preferable than one between Tatsuya-kun and Miyuki-san. They just have to ignore the feelings of the people personally involved."

"So, this would be what they call a marriage of convenience, which the magical community is celebrated for."

Mari thought of it more as the mating of thoroughbred

livestock more than a marriage of convenience, but she hesitated describing it as such.

“That’s true, but... I don’t think it’s purely out of the convenience for the families. I mean, Masaki-kun is the eldest son, so normally he would be in the position to accept a bride.”

Having gone as far as to say it, Mayumi turned her eyes away for some reason as if a little embarrassed.

“The Ichijou Family’s display of bravado is because Masaki-kun likes Miyuki-san, I think.”

“...Oh.”

Mari, who was frowning just earlier, grinned wilily as if she had just discovered something groundbreaking.

“So that’s it. ...Your Father is trying to make you marry because you like Tatsuya-kun. Is that it?”

“No, it’s not!”

Mayumi’s face turned red as she hit the table with both of her hands.

There was no mistaking the disruption field in place around them was the only thing preventing the entire school cafeteria from looking at them. Mayumi’s reaction had been that fierce.

“That sly dog just got it wrong! He’s just trying to use me to annoy the Yotsuba Family!”

“Really now?”

“Why do you look so unconvinced!? I’m really the one being inconvenienced here!”

“So you would rather not?”

Mayumi was rendered speechless, without her even realizing it, by Mari’s quick questioning.

Mari raised both ends of her lips as if to show she had got it all according to plan.

Impelled by the sense that she is in danger of actually acknowledging Mari's words, Mayumi forced her frozen tongue to move.

"It's not that I would rather not, but... But I just can't see Tatsuya-kun that way. I can't imagine being engaged to Tatsuya-kun."

"Why is that?"

Mari attacked without delay.

"Why you say—"

"Surely Saegusa Mayumi won't make a good match with Shiba Tatsuya."

However, the story changed when he became a direct descendant of the Yotsuba Family. He is not unqualified to become the husband of the eldest daughter of the Saegusa Family, both in terms of blood relations and power."

"I mean, Tatsuya-kun is even two years younger than me!?"

"I don't think an age difference of just two years would be a big problem though. ...Does he even look younger than you to begin with? You look younger than Tatsuya-kun from my point of view."

"How rude! If you're going to say that, then you don't look any much older than him, you know!"

"In what universe do I look younger than Tatsuya-kun?"

" 'Oh, I can't do this,' 'Oh, the terminal isn't working right,' 'Oh, it won't print out a report.' You're always just cozying up to Tatsuya-kun! Actually, isn't it you who likes Tatsuya-kun more!?"

“I have Shuu, you know!”

“That’s not a reason to like or not like Tatsuya-kun, now is it!”

Mayumi and Mari glared at each other face to face, then immediately averted their eyes.

Both their faces were red. Normally, this would be the scene where they would exchange empty smiles, and move on to a completely different topic from their petty argument.

However, that didn’t happen this time.

Mari ended up flustered from their exchange of inflammatory words, but she immediately recovered her serious composure. A smile could be seen on Mari’s face as her eyes once again fell upon Mayumi.

“Mayumi, what do you really want to do?”

Mayumi, surprised by Mari’s unimaginably serious voice, looked back at Mari.

“What’s with you all of a sudden?”

Mari stared at Mayumi fixedly. That face could not possibly be joking.

“It doesn’t benefit Tatsuya-kun’s sister, but it also holds no real downsides for you, Mayumi.”

“What’re you getting at? I mean, I don’t think of Tatsuya-kun as anyone special...”

“You don’t have to say any more. Just shut up and listen.”

Having heard Mari’s strong words, Mayumi stopped making up excuses.

“I intend to know why you haven’t had a boyfriend up until now. Regarding your lacking pursuit of a relationship between you and the eldest sons of the Juumonji or Itsuwa Families, I understand that it’s a modest protest against the future that was

decided for you.”

Mayumi didn't object to Mari's statement. It wasn't that Mari hit the mark with her words, but Mayumi wanted to listen to everything Mari had to say first.

“Didn't you always tell me you never looked at Juumonji as a possible boyfriend? Is that because he's the type of partner who would notice right away? Juumonji has always been a fellow Magician from the Juumonji Family to you, not even a fellow student. That's why he sees you as Mayumi, the eldest daughter of the Saegusa Family, not someone who came from an all-girl's school.”

Mayumi listened to Mari's words without saying a word nor showing a reaction. Her expression was reminiscent of a Noh mask.

“You're looking at him to see if he's suitable as a member of the Ten Master Clans, not if he's suitable as a partner. There's no way feelings of love would arise like that. Respect, maybe, but not love.”

Mari continued to speak, not paying attention to Mayumi's lack of response.

“But Tatsuya-kun is different, isn't he? You were first introduced as someone older than him, and gradually came to like him, and then found out he was from the Ten Master Clans. I would like to consider my usage of like to mean affection towards the opposite sex, but I wouldn't go so far as to imply it. However, you at least like him. Am I wrong?”

“You are not wrong. I don't think my liking of Tatsuya-kun is love, but everything else is as you said.”

Mayumi answered disinterestedly; Mari nodded.

“Incidentally, the person that you like is the person that they

allowed to date the eldest daughter of the Saegusa Family. This would be your first experience.”

“Hmm, that’s right.”

“Well then, what’s your first step? No, wait, that’s not how this should be asked. Mayumi.”

“What?”

“Do you just want to wait without doing anything? Or do you actually want to do something?”

“I don’t want to be passive, but what can I do?”

“I want to tell you, ‘Find the answer yourself,’ but yeah. Well, here’s an idea; you have the chance to confirm how you really feel about Tatsuya-kun.”

Mayumi said, “I know,” then she stopped.

“What do you mean by that?”

“If you know if you have feelings for Tatsuya-kun, you can align your interests with your father’s. You can act like you are being used by your father, but in reality it’d be you who’s actually using him.”

“Using that sly dog, you say... That’s tempting.”

Mayumi stopped short of hinting at an evil smile without realizing it.

“...But that would involve a lot of work.”

“You’ll know that once you actually try dating him, now won’t you?”

“Date someone I don’t like? Rather, someone I’m not sure I like or not?”

Realizing they had almost gone full circle with the denial, Mayumi surrendered and spoke her thoughts.

“That wouldn’t be too weird, would it? Isn’t that a common saying? ‘Let’s start by being friends,’ or something along those lines?”

“That’s not what you’d say to someone you don’t really know. We’re bound to start out as friends with our current relationship. And just what do I do when that fails? Say I dated him, and we went straight to being engaged. I can’t back off with just ‘Turns out being lovers won’t work out’ after going through all of that!”

“So that’s how it is?”

“Of course!”

“I see... Well then, it seems your only choice is to date Tatsuya-kun without his sister finding out.”

“How did you even reach that conclusion!?”

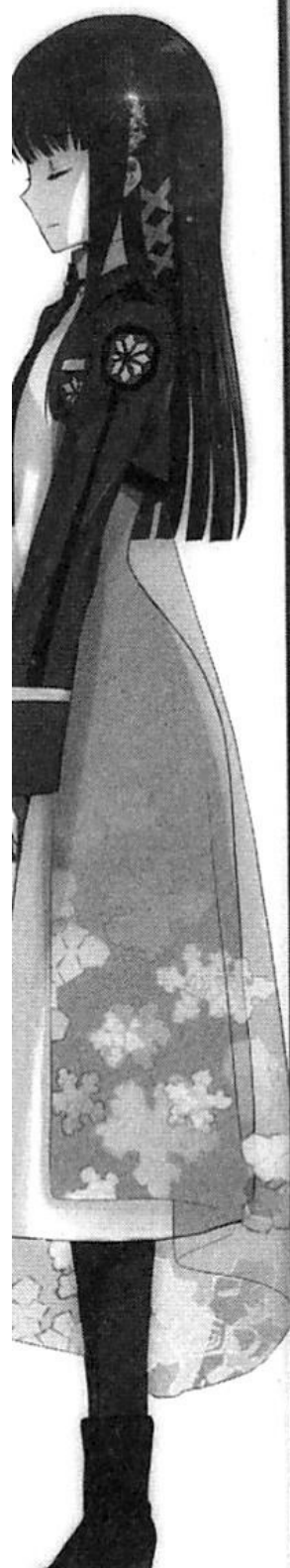
“Didn’t you want to confirm it for yourself? How you feel about Tatsuya-kun?”

“I told you that wasn’t the case...”

“Well then, why are you discussing this with me?”

Mayumi’s expression froze.

“Haven’t you always come to me when you’re troubled? Even though it may be your first time dating someone who’s already engaged, isn’t being unable to solve this on your own the problem? If you think hard enough, shouldn’t you have just declined the proposal? Since he’s already engaged, the situation is borderline impossible as it stands.”



“...I did decline. But that sly dog would keep bringing it up again and again.”

“Your father probably has seen through that, you know. The fact you don’t really object to it.”

“.....”

“Mayumi. At this rate, you’d just end up going with the flow, indecisive until the end.”

“Even if you say that...”

Mayumi was stumped. She might break down if she went any further than this. Mari pretentiously turned her eyes to the multifunctional military watch wrapped around her left wrist.

“— —Our time’s up. Mayumi, you should properly think it over.”

“Yeah. ...Thank you, Mari.”

Mari stood up while Mayumi also nonchalantly left her seat.



Tatsuya who had just arrived at home saw he had mail, which was unusual and forced a frown out of him. It wasn’t an email, but rather a discrete communication using the message board for First High’s students and alumni.

The sender was Mari.

Tatsuya thought that she might have sent it to the wrong person, but he couldn’t check that without opening the letter. He also thought of opening it using a trick to prevent the read receipt, but it would lead to a more cumbersome after effect. He wouldn’t mind if he didn’t have to meet Mari afterwards, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

Even though he had a hunch this would lead to a meddlesome situation, he opened the message.

The first thing he concluded was the message was, indeed, for

him.

The message started out as a simple seasonal greeting, asking about his recent condition, and how he had been doing as of late. It was unexpectedly written in a polite manner. It was probably the result of her military education.

The heart of the mail was very simple.

It was merely a question of whether they could meet the following night.

It would be a good idea to keep this a secret.

Well, normally that would be the case, but now that he had a fiancée, he needed her permission to meet a girl alone.

Without sending a reply, he knocked on the door leading to the room next to his.

“Watanabe-senpai said she wants to meet with Onii-sama?”

Tatsuya saw abundant suspicion in Miyuki’s expression. If it was just a little flicker of doubt, he would write it off as an inevitability, but being distrusted to this extent was totally unexpected.

“I’m as surprised as you are about this sudden invitation. The last time I saw her was during the graduation ceremony.”

Tatsuya was nonchalantly playing the innocent.

“Then what is her intention with this?”

Miyuki didn’t think that Tatsuya was cheating on her, it was actually Mari who she was doubting.

Tatsuya (in Miyuki’s perspective) is a very attractive man. Even though it was known that Mari has a boyfriend, Tatsuya would be a very desirable partner to have in an affair (again, in Miyuki’s perspective).

“It isn’t a love affair.”

He wasn't only aware of what his sister was thinking, but he also frankly expressed that he saw through her.

Miyuki's face quickly became red.

While observing his innocent sister, Tatsuya feigned ignorance and continued speaking.

"Chiba Naotsugu-san is a good lover for Watanabe-senpai."

"...She might have had a fight with him."

Miyuki hid her embarrassment by stating her opinion with a disgruntled tone.

"If she just wanted to grumble, she would have called Saegusa-senpai, right?"

Miyuki's easy to understand behavior made Tatsuya chuckle during their exchange.

"...No, actually, it's the opposite."

Taken by surprise, she put on a serious, albeit dazzling, expression.

"The opposite... So that means Saegusa-senpai vented to Watanabe-senpai?"

Tatsuya put on a completely serious expression and nodded back to Miyuki's question.

"It isn't limited to just Watanabe-senpai. If a First High alumni had something to discuss, considering what's happened recently, it would most likely be about the Yotsuba Family matter."

"Ah, that's right."

There are also people who give suggestions without considering the time or place, and merely say it for their own convenience. Miyuki's first thoughts went to that by reflex, but she also understood that there are some exceptions to this.

“Even if you think about it, I’m going to ignore the exceptions we can’t do anything about.”

Miyuki’s thoughts were plainly seen through again by Tatsuya.

“.....”

Miyuki’s white skin became vermillion again.

Without concerning himself with her looking at the floor, Tatsuya continued his reasoning.

“If I were to guess as to who will take action regarding the notification given by the Yotsuba Family, the most likely culprits would be those from the Ten Master Clans. I assume that Saegusa-senpai was dragged into a scheme conceived by the Head of the Saegusa Family. Then, the puzzled Saegusa-senpai went to Watanabe-senpai for advice. Considering their relationship, this invitation isn’t a mystery at all.”

“It can’t be!”

Miyuki vigorously lifted up her face which still had a tinge of red to it.

Intense anxiety surfaced on her face.

“Why are you panicking like that?”

He couldn’t understand why Miyuki got panicked, because of that Tatsuya paused his reasoning and asked why.

“Could it be that... the Saegusa Family is scheming to make Onii-sama Senpai’s fiancée?”

Miyuki’s thought took Tatsuya by surprise. This would definitely warrant her concern.

“...No matter how you look at it, isn’t that progressing a little too quick?”

Of course it wasn’t an impossibility, but Tatsuya was of the mindset it wouldn’t happen even if the chance was there.

Mayumi's nature wasn't one that would be obediently married as a political piece.

"I wonder..."

Miyuki and Mayumi shared that trait, neither would readily become a puppet of their own parent. But if Mayumi shared her father's decision— —it would be a whole different story.

"No, it isn't like that."

To shake off her anxiety, she spoke words of denial to herself.

"So then Onii-sama, what are you going to do with Watanabe-senpai's invitation?"

"I don't have the luxury of ignoring it. Plus, I'm curious about why she went through so much trouble to contact me."

Tatsuya nuanced his words to mean "there is no other way" so he could avoid distressing Miyuki.



The next day, in the afternoon at 5:55 P.M., Tatsuya visited a café near the National Defense Academy's Special War Skills Research Department's auxiliary building.

To make it brief, the Special War Skill Research Department is a course with a curriculum for Magicians focused on research and also training for combat Magicians. They conduct a lot of joint research and also have a secondary building near the Magic University.

The Special War Skill Research Department's students have been exempted from a dormitory lifestyle. Even so, Mari made the location for their appointment to be near the school building due to military drills they have on Sunday.

Tatsuya arrived 5 minutes before the meeting time. Then at 5:59 P.M., he saw Mari's figure.

“Hey, sorry to make you wait. It’s been a while Tatsuya-kun.”

“Yes, it has.”

Under the coat, Mari was wearing plain clothes. Her pants-suit combo wasn’t rare in the university, nor in government or company offices.

Chances are that she got it from the National Defense Academy, and it was a uniform.

“I rented a room in this area.”

Mari gave an explanation when she noticed Tatsuya gazing at her clothing. It seems she picked this place not because of being near the school, but rather that it was conveniently close to her place.

“That’s right, we also had a drill today too... I feel bad for calling you out at this hour.”

“Let’s ignore that for now. What’s your business with me?”

Tatsuya wasn’t trying to push Mari away. Just like she had said, it was quite late for a man and woman to be meeting. Since they were close to the National Defense Academy, it wasn’t a strange sight to see students visiting this place... But to avoid misunderstandings, they decided to finish their matters quickly.

“That’s right. We both have classes tomorrow, so let’s save the idle chatter for next time.”

After stating her piece, she ordered a hot coffee from the terminal on top of the shop’s desk.

“But I’d rather not leave with just having water. Please wait a little bit.”

Just as Mari said, she didn’t say anything until her drink arrived. She was planning her words during the lull.

By happenstance, the shop they were meeting at wasn’t an “old

school” shop. It didn’t even take a minute from ordering for the completion ring to sound out. Mari came back from the counter and sat in front of Tatsuya, suddenly moving her face close to his.

“Tatsuya, what do you think about Mayumi?”

Without any preface, she whispered a question.

“I think she’s a great Magician. She has talent, and also experience. As for her life and stature, she can separate them well. I have a good impression of her because of that.”

In spite of that sudden question, Tatsuya answered it without any hesitation.

“...You know, I hate that part of you.”

Mari glared at Tatsuya with an annoyed expression. She could tell that he knew what she was getting at, even if he put on a face feigning ignorance.

Tatsuya reacted to Mari’s glare without faltering. She didn’t even put her drink down.

“Why do you want to know about something like that?”

Tatsuya’s expression changed to a frown as he fired a question back.

Mari didn’t answer Tatsuya.

“I’m gonna ask again. What do you think of Mayumi as someone of the opposite gender? Do you like her? Do you dislike her? Please answer seriously.”

“As someone of a different gender, it can’t be explained in such black and white terms.”

“Even so, I want to hear it.”

Tatsuya didn’t have any obligation to answer Mari’s question. With Tatsuya’s current situation, answering would bring him more trouble than merit.

“I will say that I like her.”

But he still answered. Not because of the pressure the girl in front of him was putting out, but rather out of curiosity as to what would come next.

“As someone of the opposite sex right?”

“Yes.”

“I see...”

Tatsuya didn't have any sensibility on the feeling of “liking someone from the opposite gender.” It wasn't within the extent of his limited emotional processing. Affection for a member of the opposite sex was of far lower priority than his fondness towards Miyuki. But he didn't have to explain any of that to Mari.

“Is that affection considered love?”

“It is not. If I must say it, these feelings are more like sexual desire.”

Tatsuya showed no embarrassment when delivering that line. Mari, on the other hand, was blushing.

“Y-you have that kind of desire as well, huh?”

“Mari was quite inexperienced on this topic,” Tatsuya thought. Even though premarital sex was a taboo in this generation, her reaction was very innocent for someone who had been in a relationship for a long time.

Of course, Tatsuya had the common sense to not sexually harass Mari with those words.

“Of course I have it. It's a primordial desire to preserve one's own lineage.”

That wasn't a lie. But Tatsuya didn't share the whole truth that his upper sexual limit was predetermined. It has no capability to rule over his actions or thoughts. Miya's Mental Interference

Magic ensured this.

Because of that, Tatsuya's matter of "sexual desire" isn't about to entice him to make out. This had no need to be said either.

"Watanabe-senpai. You asked me about how I feel towards Saegusa-senpai. What do you plan to do with this information?"

Mari hadn't recovered from the shock she originally got from Tatsuya.

Having the main subject of their meeting suddenly brought up, she consoled herself to stop her flustering.

"Tatsuya-kun, would you want to try going out with Mayumi?"

"...By going out, you mean like that, right? Does Senpai not know about Miyuki and I?"

Tatsuya's cold glare disheartened her, but she gathered her courage and continued.

"I know that your little sister is actually your cousin, and you both are engaged to each other."

"So you should understand that Saegusa-senpai and I shouldn't be going out."

Tatsuya's gaze became even more frigid.

Cooling magic should be his little sister's domain, but Mari felt his look could freeze her to death. She was screaming internally at herself to stay awake, for some reason she had started hallucinating that falling asleep could cause her to die from frostbite.

"Your engagement is being contested by the Ichijou Family. Isn't that right?"

"You are quite informed. Did you hear that from Saegusa-senpai?"

The formal objection made by the Ichijou Family shouldn't

have reached her ears. The engagement between Tatsuya and Miyuki was legal — — though, if the actual link between Tatsuya and Miyuki got leaked, they would be punished for forgery of official documents — —, the Ichijou Family had already caused a scandal in the world of magic. With that in mind, this whole topic has been kept more or less private.

“Oh yeah. Also, Mayumi is in the same situation as well. Hmm, saying this the wrong way will cause misunderstandings... Mayumi is in the same boat as the Ichijou Family’s eldest son. They’re both being ordered to fill the same role.”

The iciness in Tatsuya’s glare vanished. It was replaced with a chill that made Mari shift uncomfortably in her seat.

“That... is a shocking story.”

Tatsuya’s remark was his evaluation of the Saegusa Family’s decision, but his heart was different. He shuddered in amazement at the revelation that Mayumi was made to be a fiancée candidate for Tatsuya. He was awed at Miyuki’s intuition being so spot on. Even though she is still considered a young lady, a female’s intuition is scary... that was the only thought in Tatsuya’s mind.

“I think so too.”

Mari’s casual remarks were welcomed by Tatsuya’s sharp tongue.

“Do you really understand what will happen?”

“What?”

“The one who will be slandered by the public won’t be me, but Saegusa-senpai.”

Mari’s eye suddenly tinged with soft light.

“How kind of you.”

“This amount of concern is normal.”

Tatsuya’s gaze didn’t relax.

“If Mayumi didn’t have feelings for you, I would have dropped this a long time ago. I told her she didn’t have to suffer from this, but she doesn’t understand her own feelings.”

And then? Tatsuya asked back with his eyes.

“Mayumi doesn’t comprehend how she feels about you. She doesn’t know the depth of her affection. No, it’s more like she doesn’t want to admit it. She’s running away from her emotions.”

“Isn’t that because she understands her position in this matter?”

“She does. Mayumi isn’t able to just choose someone based on love interest. Having a lover and being married are different things, so falling in love is pointless. That’s how she feels about it.”

“Are you sure you aren’t overthinking this? There’s certainly a tendency to prevent high level magicians from being single, but it isn’t to the point where you can’t pick your marriage partner.”

“How about you? Your little sister?”

This time Tatsuya stayed silent.

Mari didn’t pursue any further for information about those two.

“I want to make her experience love. It may be an unneeded and meddlesome thing to do, but after thinking about her situation, I don’t want her to just throw in the towel. You’re a guy so you probably don’t understand what I’m getting at.”

“You’re right. I don’t.”

“Ok... well at least just understand this; Mayumi has recognized that she has feelings for you. You might be the first and last love that she has.”

Mari's words were full of sincerity. She was only thinking about her friend's feelings.

"You're overthinking it again."

But Tatsuya threw that sincerity aside with only those words.

"Tatsuya-kun, you!"

"I don't know her as well as you do, but Saegusa-senpai doesn't seem like she'd be that weak."

Mari's enraged tongue was stopped by Tatsuya's objection.

"Give up on this matter. Abandon it. She won't be seen as an obedient child if she pursues this road. Even if I don't return her feelings, she would eventually find someone. Right?"

Tatsuya stood up, looking down at Mari who was at a loss for words.

"And above all else, it's impossible because I am Miyuki's fiancée."

The payment for Mari's drink had already been taken.

And like that, Tatsuya left the shop.

Chapter 4

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Raymond S. Clark. He's currently a high school sophomore located in USNA Berkeley, California. He had been one of Shizuku's classmates during her foreign exchange student program.

The high school he attends differs from a Japanese Magic High School in that it isn't a facility that specializes in Magic Training. In this school, Magic Studies and Magic Practice are optional subjects. However, even the USNA can't escape from the cruel lack of teachers related to Magical courses. Since the number of student applicants vastly outnumber the amount of teachers, each and every school comes up with its own entrance exam to select future students. Objectively speaking, Raymond's school had turned into a "Magic High School".

That wasn't implying he was a poor Magician. Among his peers, Raymond was at the top of his class. Still, it wasn't enough talent to enter the Stars or something similar. His value and talent lay in another area.

That's how they're called by the USNA's Intelligence Agency. In reality, they aren't so much an organization as they are a group of unaffiliated individuals with the same special ability.

"Hliðskjálf" is the hacking system concealed within the USNA's worldwide communication interceptor "Echelon III". Only seven

“operators” have access to it. That’s the ability shared between “The Seven Sages”, using Hliðskjálf, which greatly surpasses Echelon III’s legitimate operators, to gather information from anywhere in the world, earning them this title.

Among the seven operators of Hliðskjálf, there was only one person who actually used the title. This person, on a whim, gave information to the USNA about an anti-government organization and introduced himself as one of “The Seven Sages”. This was, of course, none other than Raymond.

Today as well, Raymond was swimming in the sea of information brought to him by using Hliðskjálf. He was a person who was zealous about acquiring knowledge. He also liked to investigate about specific things here and there, but amassing information without a specific topic was closer to being a hobby of his. For Raymond, Hliðskjálf was the greatest of his toys.

That being said, in order to actually use Hliðskjálf, one has to define search parameters first. That is because the nature and the function of Hliðskjálf is to answer questions.

Rays of light became characters as the search conditions were being specified. The terminal of Hliðskjálf was operated by the user’s brain waves and gestures in a VR (Virtual Reality) like environment made possible by the HMD (Head-mounted Display). The camera caught the movement of his fingertips, rays of light were projected in the virtual environment. The operator inputs the search criteria with characters of light, determining the settings with the assistance of their brain waves.

Right now, Raymond was using the broad “Scandal of the USNA Army” terms for his research. A massive amount of information opened in the sky, being displayed in various “windows”. The window in the distance displayed only the titles of articles while the window close-by was displaying their contents. Another window was composed of diagrams with their

accompanying text, another contained images, and another was a video. If you directed your eyes on a window, it would come closer, while looking away would send it away. As far as the eye could see, there were innumerable windows in every direction.

Speed reading and memorization were Raymond's forte. Tens of windows queued up as he progressively carved their contents into his head. However, he unexpectedly stopped this operation. A certain window's content attracted Raymond's attention.

(The contents of an old depot for small missiles went missing...?)

It would be no surprise if this fact had made headlines. Sadly, it wasn't unusual to hear that old weapons that were planned to be scrapped had up and disappeared.

The missiles that went missing were using C-20 (cyclotrimethylene trinitramine) as the main explosive ingredient for an infantry-usable anti-aircraft missile. Even though it had been used quite a bit during the war that lasted until 2020, the progress on nanotechnologies allowing explosions to surpass the previous limits had forced these weapons into obsolescence.

(Still, it's a well-tried warfare tool... I can't think of this affair as just a matter of control negligence.)

Raymond licked his lips at the perspective of having found something suspicious. His forte was his fast reading speed and good memory, but he also had some kind of sixth sense for detecting fishy affairs.

For Raymond, the events occurring in the real world were like the grandest shows. The more substantial and serious the event was, the greater his interest became.

He knew full-well that he was no superman. Even if his magical talent was first-class, it wasn't anywhere near the world's finest. He knew that he would never be an influential

Magician. Nor will he ever become a hero travelling the world.
— — No matter how much he wished for it.

Raymond looked at his potential that way. That is why, by lending his power to real heroes, he could feel like he shared in their adventures. He could then enjoy watching the events unfold on the stage he had set.

That's what he thought, and Hliðskjálf made this a possibility.

It was like Hliðskjálf had been made to allow him to do so.

(Should I start by examining this from the management situation of the depot?)

Even if he finds out where the missing missiles went, he wasn't sure that this whole thing would end there. No matter the affair, it was always a human's hand that caused it. Who could've put those weapons on the black market? Raymond started a search with a now all too familiar procedure.



Before Raymond noticed the disappearance of the old missiles — — two days before in fact — — this matter had become a problem for the USNA Army. This wasn't a matter that could remain within the base's jurisdiction, so the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the USNA's Intelligence Division had begun an internal investigation.

The reason this matter wasn't entrusted to the gendarmerie was because they suspected a terrorist organization was involved. Those missiles could be put on the black market and end up in the hands of terrorists. If that disaster became reality, it would mean that once those missiles had been used and their origin discovered, it would provoke a worldwide scandal. The Department of Defense was ready to do anything to prevent that.

However, the investigation had already started six days ago,

but it was now January 27th and things had hardly progressed. Despite the fact that it was a Sunday, the Number 2, Colonel Virginia Balance, was present in the office. She had a grim expression as she read the presented report.

There were almost no clues whatsoever that would help in this affair.

She understood from the very beginning that the perpetrators must've received inside help. To begin with, it was practically impossible to steal weapons from the military, as old as those weapons were, without the cooperation from the inside. However, even if they somehow managed to bribe the captain of the unit charged with guarding the warehouse, there was no way they could've taken the weapons without leaving any trace whatsoever.

The comings and goings of weapons are double, if not triple-checked. In addition to an RFID^[2] tag, the warehouses are equipped with biometric sensors, and moreover, it is impossible to open or shut the accesses if you are alone because the need for two people cannot be bypassed. They were investigating if there had been any anomalies in those systems, to no avail.

Virginia was reminded of a point that was particularly perturbing her: how did they notice that something went missing?

The loss of the missiles was noticed by the people responsible for checking stocks. However, if this theft was performed by an organization capable of completely bypassing the security of the warehouse, why didn't they also falsify the stock records? These were obsolete weapons awaiting disposal. If they had modified the data to make it seem like they had been disposed of, no one would have noticed.

It was as if someone had stolen them and allowed them to

notice on purpose. Colonel Virginia genuinely felt that this was the case.

(But then, who could've done that, and for what purpose? No, to begin with, who even has the capability to pull something like this off?)

The lack of information made it impossible to reach a conclusion.

Knowing so, Virginia was lost in unnecessary thoughts.

Virginia collected herself at the sound of her phone's ringtone, signaling a new email. It wasn't an ordinary email either. It was a communication using a code that only top-level members of the Intelligence Division knew about.

With practiced, machine-like movements of her hands, she transferred the contents of the email to an offline decoder as per procedure. It wouldn't be readable on a device available due to the masses to prevent sharing information in plain text. When she saw the deciphered message and spotted the name of the sender, Virginia wore an amazed expression.

"The Seven Sages".

Her eyes glistened as she read the contents. Forgetting to breathe as she pored over the contents, it took a few moments for her to compose herself after reading the email.

"Are these kinds of things even permitted?"

The secret information received from "The Seven Sages" stated that the President's Assistant of the Deputy Chief of Staff took part in the matter.

And even worse was the motive. If what was written here was true, then all of this was part of a much larger-scale plan that vastly exceeded Virginia's expectations.

Virginia stretched her hand towards the visiphone when her

hand stopped.

She was hesitating about who exactly she should call. No, to be more precise, she had no idea.

To whom she should share this information with, and if she can even trust anyone with this, Virginia was at a loss.



Angelina Sirius, High Commander in direct command of the USNA Army's Magician Force, Stars, was enjoying a rare shopping break.

Of course, she currently wasn't walking around as the "Strategic-Class Magician Angie Sirius" but as the 17-year-old, Lina.

Instead of going to the nearest town Roswell, Silvia Mercury First, nicknamed Silvie, who was accompanying Lina, strongly recommended that they extend their travel to Albuquerque.

Since their mission last year in Japan, these two have been spending quite a lot of time together. Despite their age difference, Silvie treated Lina as if she was her younger sister. Lina's utter lack of what could be called a normal girl's common sense provoked a swirl of emotions inside of her, and she simply could not leave Lina alone.

Today, like prior ones, was Silvie playing dress-up using Lina as the doll. However, Lina was also enjoying herself. Even though her fashion sense was on the questionable side, she like dressing up. To be fair, if the subject's tastes were fine, there wasn't much need to improve them.

In this case, Lina didn't have someone to look pretty for in comparison to Miyuki, which lead to a huge gap.

But putting all of that aside, Lina was going back to the base's lodging house in a very good mood, carrying her spoils of war.

You could say that those were very fulfilling holidays. Even though she didn't receive any mobilization orders as Sirius, a harsh session of training was waiting for her tomorrow. Today had been pretty refreshing, Lina was quite satisfied.

However, her cheerful mood was immediately blown away by the mail she received on her room's terminal.

“An encrypted mail!?”

It wasn't that unusual for her to receive an encrypted mail containing secret orders. However, that a mail using the special encryption code only known of the High Commander, the Chiefs of Staff and the Captains of the Stars, arriving directly on her room's terminal was a first.

Could it be an emergency? In a mix of impatience and nervousness, Lina was waiting for the decoder to transcribe the contents of the mail.

Shocked feelings surfaced in her expression as she started to read.

“The Seven Sages...?”

The name of the sender was “The Seven Sages”.

“A joke?” was Lina's first reaction but she dismissed that thought as quickly as it came. There is no way a mere hacker could access the Stars special encryption code. To begin with, the title of “The Seven Sages” wasn't known by those outside the direct control of the Joint Chiefs of Staff HQ.

Lina hurriedly resumed her reading. A few events without seemingly any relation to her duties were recorded.

“Eh!? The mastermind behind the Parasite event!?”

However, as she reached the end of the mail, information that was strongly connected to Lina started to appear.

Lina had been sent to Japan due to the event that occurred on October 31st, 2095 A.D. She had been sent to uncover the identity of the user of the Strategic-Class Magic that ravaged the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula, the “Great Bomb” (this was the name given to Material Burst by the USNA). However, once the Stars Members possessed by the Parasites started to desert and flee to Japan, as a part of her High Commander’s duties she ordered their “Disposal”.

Lina was told that the Parasite outbreak was the result of an accident.

Due to that fact, it was supposed to end with the deaths of the affected people. However, if this source was to be trusted, then the Parasite Affair had been purposely started and the perpetrator was responsible for the comrades that Lina was forced to kill. The added despair from her assassination duty would also be the instigator’s fault.

This was definitely something that couldn’t be forgiven.

“...The Mastermind of the Parasites is going to try to perform acts of terrorism in Japan by using old missiles he stole? This can’t be real!?”

After she finished her reading of the mail, Lina found herself instinctively shouting about.

This was information coming from a dubious source. There was no guarantee that it held any truth.

A profiler working for the USNA Army had analyzed “The Seven Sages” and came to the conclusion that they most likely enjoyed the reactions provoked by their whimsical acts. Even if that mail truly came from “The Seven Sages”, Lina couldn’t shrug off the possibility that this was all part of an elaborate plan to play some kind of trick on her.

Despite that, Lina believed this information.

During the last stages of the Parasite Affair of last year, just like today, Lina had received information from someone using the name “The Seven Sages”. At that time, she didn’t have any reason to believe the information given either. But even still, she had believed it was the truth.

This time was the same. Her believing it had no basis. There was no real reason for her to believe it.

However, if she ignored this information and something happened afterwards she would deeply regret it.

Being tricked, being manipulated and becoming a laughingstock wouldn’t compare to that.

If the conspiracy recorded in the mail was the truth and became reality, then the USNA would have a great debt towards Japan. Considering Japan’s current state of tension, if USNA-made weapons were used in terrorist acts... Then it wouldn’t be surprising if Japan accused them of instigating terrorism on their territory.

If you think about the difference in power between the two countries, the possibility of a war happening was rather small. However, that is if we’re only taking conventional war potential in account, and not something like the Strategic-Class Magic responsible for “Scorched Halloween”. If the range of that magic can extend even further than the Pacific Ocean— —as another user of Strategic-Class Magic, Lina’s common sense denies the possibility of... the worst could happen.

That is why she believes the information.

Lina was convinced she had to stop this plan from reaching fruition. Not just obstructing, but actually killing the mastermind behind it as well.

However, according to the information provided by “The Seven Sages”, the Mastermind “Jiedo Heigu” had already left the USNA for Japan.

Indeed, it would be difficult for Lina to act outside of her country, let alone in Japan.

Lina decided to consult about this entire scenario with the only person she thought could help.



Virginia extended her hand towards the ringing visiphone.

Her posture crumbled for a moment. She quickly recovered and pressed the button to accept the call.

[Colonel, forgive me for calling unannounced.]

Lina appeared on the screen, saluting in her purple-black Stars uniform.

Seeing Lina’s appearance, as if she had just changed in her fresh, tight uniform, Virginia felt slightly nostalgic.

“Major Sirius. Weren’t you on leave today?”

Lina’s expression betrayed her surprise. She struggled to understand why Virginia was aware of her schedule despite the fact that she is not even under her direct command. From Virginia’s point of view, it was part of the course for her to know everything about the movements of a Strategic-Class Magician, one of the “Twelve Apostles”, the strongest magician of the USNA and High Commander of the Stars, Angie Sirius.

“Don’t pay attention to what I just said. So, do you have any business with me?”

Sincerely apologizing for the idle talk, Virginia enquired about the reason of her call.

[Yes. Being blunt I require assistance from the Colonel about a

report I received.]

Being urged on by Virginia, Lina began exposing the matter.

“Go on.”

[Understood. To tell you the truth, in the period of time ranging from 0900 hours to 1632 hours when I was out, I received an encrypted message from someone who claimed to be a member of “The Seven Sages”.]

“When you say the Seven Sages, are you talking about ‘those’ ‘Seven Sages’?”

Hiding the shock, she received behind a poker face, Virginia responded so.

[It was indeed the sender’s name. Although, I have no way of knowing whether it is the truth or not.]

“Hmm.”

Virginia nodded and urged Lina to continue through the camera.

[Assuming that the source of information is indeed “The Seven Sages”, the report stated that weapons stolen from our army are going to be used in a terrorist attack. The target would be Japan.]

“What kind of weapon?”

[Infantry-Carried Anti-Aircraft Missiles.]

“...Major, do you think such a case of theft actually occurred?”

[I don’t have a definite answer. However, there are indeed rumors about weapons awaiting disposal being stolen from us.]

Virginia uttered a sigh. If someone like Lina who was pretty much isolated from the regular military troops...

If the information leaked so far that even a “Sheltered Official” such as her was aware of this matter, then that means it wasn’t

just the staff in-charge of the weapons' surveillance whose discipline was lacking.

[Colonel?]

A worried expression started to appear on Lina's face. Knowing her, she might be thinking that she offended Virginia in some way.

Virginia herself interpreted it so anyway. For her, this was rather vexing.

“No, it's nothing. Please go on.”

[Understood. Even though there was no mention of a specific target, there were references concerning a Mastermind. The name was Jiedo Heigu. He became a political refugee following Dahan's ruin, his Chinese name is Gu Jie. His estimated age would be between 60 and 90 years old. Black eyes and white hair, it appears that despite his Eastern Asian lineage, he possesses dark skin. There was a special note mentioning that he might be a survivor of the Kunlunfang Institute.]

“The Kunlunfang Institute? Isn't that the Magic Research Laboratory of Dahan that was exterminated by the Yotsuba?”

[I think that is indeed the case.]

They couldn't possibly be thinking of taking revenge on the Yotsuba by using the missiles, could they? Virginia thought, but she immediately dismissed that hypothesis as nonsensical. If the Yotsuba could be dealt with as simply as that, they wouldn't be feared as “Untouchable” throughout the world.

[Furthermore.]

While Virginia was lost in her thoughts, Lina continued her report.

[It appears that Jiedo Heigu was the Mastermind behind the Parasite Affair.]

Virginia had a look of understanding.

“I see, so this was the main reason of your call.”

Even if her intention was discovered, Lina didn't cower.

[Colonel. Even if the information about Jiedo Heigu's relation to the Parasite Affair is the truth, I would like to know his degree of involvement. The deserters might have had no relation to the Parasite Outbreak, and could have been mere pawns. However, if this Jiedo Heigu has even the slightest link to this affair, I cannot overlook it. If I don't pay him back with my very own hands, I won't be able to get over it.]

“Major Sirius. Are you telling me you want to go to Japan once more?”

[Affirmative, Colonel.]

Virginia frowned as if taken by a sudden headache.

Allowing Lina to leave the country was a difficult matter. Even under the best circumstances, dispatching magicians to other countries should be done carefully. The degree of difficulty increases by several orders of magnitude if they were talking about the Strategic-Class Magician “Sirius”. One of the Strategic-Class Magicians of the USNA, Roland Bart, had been placed in the British territory of Gibraltar, but even then, there was almost no record of him going out of that base. To the extent that he is purposely called back to the USNA during his vacations.

Having sent Lina in Japan last year was an exception among exceptions.

Lina herself probably understood all of this very well. That is why Virginia also understood what this was about when Lina decided to call her. Moreover, Virginia fully understood Lina's desire to take revenge on Heigu with her own hands.

“...At this time I cannot give you an answer. Major, you will

have to give me some time.”

Lina couldn't hide her surprise in front of the camera. For her, who thought that she would be immediately rejected, Virginia's response was going in a surprisingly good direction.

[Yes, I'm counting on you, Colonel.]

The call ended with Lina's appearance saluting on the screen.



Meanwhile, Jiedo Heigu, or Gu Jie, was at sea.

Even though up until a few days ago he had lived on the USNA's West Coast, he didn't possess USNA citizenship.

Gu Jie's homeland was Dahan, a country that had already disappeared.

He used to belong to the Magician Development Institute of Kunlunfang. In the eventuality that Dahan would collapse, the USNA's government would grant him refugee status, and as such, his social status was currently that of a normal refugee.

However, at the time Gu Jie arrived on the North American continent in 2054, the country's name was still the USA. Dahan's collapse occurred in February of the year 2064 A.D., merely a single year after the destruction of the Kunlunfang Institute.

After the collapse of Dahan, rather, the destruction of the Kunlunfang Institute, Gu Jie didn't seek asylum from North America. He ran away from Dahan.

The Kunlunfang Institute predated the division between the Great Asian Alliance and Dahan, and one could think of it as the main Modern Magic's research laboratory of the old Eastern Asian region.

However, that wasn't the entire truth.

The Kunlunfang Institute had earned quite the renown as a

laboratory developing Modern Magic. But that wasn't the only thing they had been working on.

Both Ancient Magic and Modern Magic were being researched.

However, just like the other countries, those two "factions", so to speak, were at odds.

Originally, the Ninth Institute in Japan was supposed to use the know-how of Ancient Magic to develop Modern Magic. That being said, it wasn't researching both Ancient Magic and Modern Magic simultaneously. In the end, the Ancient Magic Users revolted, and the rebels also took over the Ninth Institute after the lockdown.

Both groups turned into something similar to organizations, competing for leadership. Ancient Magic and Modern Magic users argued about each and every policy for the Research Laboratories, including objectives, budgets, and human resources.

Even in the Kunlunfang Institute, both Ancient Magic users and Modern Magic users fiercely competed for control.

Despite the fact that the Kunlunfang Institute was the main laboratory of Dahan, the internal dispute continued. No, rather, it intensified and this escalation would bring about a catastrophe before long. The Modern Magic side ended up winning the power struggle and banished the Ancient Magic users from the Institute. This happened in the year 2054.

It was at that time that Gu Jie, as an Ancient Magic User, fled to North America along with his apprentice Zhou Gongjin. That's why, under normal circumstances, Gu Jie shouldn't have any grudge towards the Yotsuba nor Japan's Magicians. The Yotsuba were the ones who crushed the Modern Magician sect, the ones who had taken over the Kunlunfang Institute. They should have been something similar to a "the enemy of my enemy is my ally" existence to Gu Jie.

However, after Dahan's collapse, Gu Jie decided that the Yotsuba and the Japanese Magic Community were targets for revenge. Exactly what kind of mental thought process led him to that conclusion, no one really knew.

Was it patriotism?

Did he feel like his own revenge of Dahan had been taken away from him?

Was an enemy simply needed to maintain his subordinate's cohesion?

The only thing that was certain was that Gu Jie constructed a criminal network made up of Dahan's deserters, that he exerts a powerful control over them and that his only known objective so far is revenge. As for the person in question, nothing else is known.

When he was still alive, Zhou Gongjin had apparently compared his obsession to that of a "vengeful spirit".

Due to the lack of apparent reason behind his acts, it was impossible to convince him to stop. Having lost his last apprentice, Zhou Gongjin, he decided take matters into his own hands.

However, Gu Jie's direct, immediate fighting potential was low. Even though he was also a user of Ancient Continental Magic, the Magic that he possessed wasn't suited for direct confrontation. If we're talking strictly about duels, Zhou Gongjin was his superior. This was something Gu Jie himself was willing to admit.

Gu Jie was proficient in techniques that used human organs or parts to create magic devices, like with the case of "Sorcery Boosters", that is, to turn a human into a tool functioning similarly to a "Generator", and magic for controlling corpses.

He was the practitioner of the side of Magic that concentrated all of its vilest aspects, but ethical questions aside, he really wasn't the type to fight head on. Actually, he had kept himself to just being a manipulator until now.

For Gu Jie himself to come to Japan was proof that he had been cornered, and had no other choice.

The international Anti-Magic Political Organization that he had been supporting, "Blanche", had been considerably weakened by the pressure and measures taken by the governments of several nations. As the leader of the criminal syndicate "No Head Dragon", he had also tried to spread rumors in both Japan and the USNA (with the cooperation of the Great Asian Alliance) but his plan ended in failure as well.

Finally, he lost his envoy in Japan, Zhou Gongjin. Zhou Gongjin had been under Gu Jie's command for more than 40 years, the last remaining person who had fled Dahan with him. With this loss, Gu Jie was forced to act by himself.

Zhou Gongjin had been killed in October of last year.

It was slightly past mid-January when Gu Jie left from the Los Angeles' port.

It wasn't because he was mourning the death of his apprentice, nor because his plan had failed that Gu Jie took more than two months to make his move. It was the result of him waiting for the most appropriate time. Truth be told, he wanted to leave for Japan immediately and retaliate, however, if he failed to, then things would be over once and for all. He was conscious of that fact.

With his magical skills, being too aggressive was impossible. That isn't to say that his magical skills are nonexistent, but against a first-rate Magician, it was nowhere near sufficient. That was why he first needed weapons.

If Blanche and No Head Dragon had been in a better state, a simple word of his would have done the deal, and a single month would've been more than enough to gather the materials.

That would include the arrangements required for a ship that would cross the Pacific Ocean. As things are, he had to set up all of that himself. To be more precise, he found a random punk that he used as a disposable puppet, but since he had to go through the trouble of preparing him as well as giving him various orders, it was basically as if he had done all the work himself. Furthermore, to make it so that this puppet wouldn't be traced back to him, he embarked it on the boat to get rid of it in the ocean.

"Sir Gu. We can be expected to enter the port of Yokosuka tomorrow morning."

The captain of the freighter reported so to a Gu Jie who was looking at the sea in front of him. The deck of the freighter was completely covered by solar panels.

"Just as planned."

Without any trace of exhaustion from the long journey, Gu Jie answered in a firm voice.

Gu Jie is currently 97 years old. His outward appearance however was barely that of someone in his fifties. His hair was completely white, however, the wrinkles, sagging and age spots that one should normally find on someone of his age were inexistent.

"And also, umm... Sir, my reward."

"I understand. Tomorrow at the morning twilight, I will apply my Magic."

"Thank you very much! Even after this journey ends, I promise my unwavering loyalty to you, Sir."

Gu Jie nodded with a pleased expression. Behind this mask however, he had nothing but contempt for the captain.

The reward this captain was talking about. Longevity and perpetual youth.

It was the truth that Gu Jie's "surgery" could maintain a perpetual youth, his very own face was the proof of that.

However, even if he could guarantee a physical youth, longevity was out of his reach. He couldn't give genuine immortality.

This surgery of his was a magic developed in the Kunlunfang Institute, and it was the very reason of his presence in the Kunlunfang Institute.

Unsurprisingly, coming from humans with power, the Leaders of Dahan longed for perpetual youth. And while the Modern Magic Users in the Kunlunfang Institute replied that it was impossible, Ancient Magic Users assured them of the opposite. For the Ancient Magic Users whose position had fallen behind Modern Magic in the race of arms that the Kunlunfang Institute advocated, it had been a godsend.

The one who was developing the most promising magic among the Ancient Magic Users group was Gu Jie. Of course, it was his surgery of perpetual youth.

It was in the year 2049 that he used his magic on his own body, like a test subject.

To ascertain whether this magic could be used safely or not, he used it on nine apprentices in the year 2050.

After 5 years had passed, it was confirmed that Gu Jie's aging had come to a stop. His apprentices didn't develop any side-effects either, and it was then thought that a magic of perpetual youth had been achieved.

However, there was a drawback in this Magic. Certainly, this

“Surgery of Perpetual Youth” appeared to stop the aging. However, if the person the magic is performed on doesn’t have the aptitude, the compensation for staying young is to consume their life force. In other words, one’s lifespan. There had been some cases of sudden death after three to six months.

A magic that acts for eternity is impossible. This holds true for both Modern Magic and Ancient Magic. The surgery of perpetual youth consists of implanting the magic inside of someone who then continually applies it.

This magic had been made specifically for Ancient Magic practitioners.

What would happen if a Magician tried to perform a magic that he has no aptitude for?

What would happen if this magic was used on someone who isn’t even a Magician?

The surgery of perpetual youth gave the one answer to those questions.

When the men of influence from Dahan, who had already received the “Surgery of Perpetual Youth” presented it to their kinsmen, Gu Jie explained to them the flaws in his Magic.

The ensuing result was the purge of the Ancient Magic Users’ group.

Quickly learning the failure of his experiment, Gu Jie took his apprentices and fled to North America.

20 years later, Gu Jie realized that his magic also didn’t prolong one’s longevity either.

He realized it with his own apprentices’ deaths.

In the end, the surgery that he had developed could only stop the degradation of one’s outward appearance. The only reason Gu Jie lived up to this age was that he originally had a long life

ahead of him.

It was this kind of imperfect Magic that the freighter's captain hoped for.

From Gu Jie's point of view, it was quite a laughable matter.

The one who told the captain about the surgery of perpetual youth was none other than Gu Jie himself. To earn the captain's cooperation, he had told him "there is a secret art that allows one to conserve his youth until the day of his death". If you cooperate with me, I will apply this magic on you.

It wasn't a lie. Without a doubt, this captain will conserve his current youth until his death. Which will probably happen within half a year.

Gu Jie himself was aware that his own time was getting dangerously short.

"I will be pretty busy from tomorrow onwards."

"I will also help you once we land on Yokosuka. Please, feel free to ask me anything, sir."

Without any knowledge about his real intentions, the captain stated so in an elated manner.



Even though Virginia had asked Lina to give her some time, she went into action pretty quickly.

She left her office the morning of the following day and made arrangements for her journey. Her destination was the Stars Headquarters situated in the city of Roswell, New Mexico.

Wrapping up all the urgent deskwork she had to do for the day, she used the encrypting device at her home to safely transmit the data via email.

This encryption machine had been a gift from Kuroba Ayako,

and the recipient of the email was Yotsuba Maya. The content of the email was basically the same as what Lina had reported to her, that an act of terrorism had been planned in Japan using stolen missiles and that the possibility of the mastermind, Jiedo Heigu, being a survivor of the Kunlunfang Institute was high.

Virginia didn't include the secret information that Lina had shared with her however. That is, an information related to the scandal on the USNA government. Even though Virginia formed an alliance with the Yotsuba Family she did not completely trust them. She had no reason to hesitate on cooperating with them, however, she couldn't endanger national interests.

The reply from Maya arrived when Virginia was eating. The content of the letter had simple words of gratitude for the information provided.

This kind of message had no real importance for her, but she didn't particularly mind. That was because this mail's purpose was simply to seal the deal regarding their alliance.

Finally, after reconfirming the schedule of each Stars Commander, she headed for the bathroom.



Maya had received Virginia's mail at 8:00 A.M., Monday, January 28th, Japan standard time.

"Hayama-san, it appears that remnants of the Kunlunfang Institute are plotting an act of terrorism here in Japan."

"That is quite the important matter."

Hayama's answer was rather neutral. Of course, he was aware of what Maya had gone through in the Kunlunfang Institute. Taking her feelings into account, it was perfectly natural for him to not return a proper answer at once, even if neither anger nor hatred could be felt from Maya's voice.

“An important matter? A mere stray dog who lost his home?”

However, it wasn't like Maya was completely emotionless. You could hear slight disdain in her voice.

“Mistress, if there really is a survivor from the Kunlunfang Institute then that means he managed to escape from the previous Head of the Family.”

Hayama lightly reproved her. Maya's pride, to be more precise.

“We have no idea what sort of unusual talent he might possess. I strongly recommend we stay vigilant.”

“I understand.”

Despite responding so, Maya's lips curved into a smile full of disdain.

“Still, what are they hoping to achieve with small missiles? Japan is not a zone of conflict after all. Moving around carrying these is practically begging to be captured, don't you think?”

“During the Yokohama Incident, the guerillas who had concealed themselves in town beforehand had managed to prepare quite a few missiles.”

“That was thanks to the camouflaged warship they had as backup, wasn't it?”

Objecting on reflex, Maya retorted.

“...Yet, it's true that there is no guarantee that we will be able to successfully prevent this planned act of terrorism.”

“Even a Magician would die if hit by a missile while in a defenseless condition. Moreover, depending on their objective, we might have to deal with danger in another form altogether. There is a possibility of them dismantling the warheads and using them as bombs too. Back during the times of war, these kinds of suicide bombing attacks were regular occurrences.”

Faced with Hayama's numerous examples, even Maya couldn't deny the necessity of dealing with it.

"Understood. Then let's look for this Jiedo Heigu. A lot of our workforce is focused on the preparation for the Master Clan Conference, however, so we won't be able to field too much personnel."

The Master Clan Conference will take place next month, in the beginning of February in 2097. In particular, this period was the reunion of the Ten Master Clans which happens once every 4 years.

The Conference will decide the members of the future Ten Master Clans for a duration of 4 years. There were 28 Houses which had the qualifications to become a Member of the Ten Master Clans, and everyone was in a hurry to perform the final tasks in order to have an advantage for the selection.

The selection will be decided by internal voting, and since only 28 Houses can participate, it will be nothing like large-scale elections or anything. However, it was necessary to make various arrangements as well as finding faults in other Houses to have the best possible odds.

"Should we talk about this matter with the other Houses?"

Maya pondered for a few moments before shaking her head from left to right at Hayama's suggestion of asking for the cooperation of the other Clans.

"I would rather not be a subject of gossip. Let me think... Alright, spread the rumor that terrorists targeting magicians have infiltrated the country. With this, we should expect them to make the necessary moves.

Could you work on this until lunch?"

"Understood, Mistress. They will be ready in two hours."

Search and Information Manipulation, giving his words this double—meaning, Hayama politely bowed.



9:00 A.M., Japan standard time, January the 28th, Gu Jie's freighter entered Yokosuka's port.

Immediately after landing, Gu Jie started to collect the required personnel for his plans. That being said, the arrangements had already been done beforehand. Despite losing the No Head Dragon Organization, Gu Jie had gathered quite the extensive know-how to make deals with the obscure sides of modern society during his days as a mastermind. As long as quality wasn't a crucial factor, it wasn't that difficult to gather personnel. No matter how prosperous a society is, unfortunate people exist.

The target had been confirmed even before the landing. Of course, the location for the Ten Master Clans Conference had only been shared between the concerned. However, using Hliðskjálf would allow one to easily uncover that information.

The super-hacking tool, Hliðskjálf. Gu Jie wasn't the type to qualify anything as "super", but the fact of the matter is, there wasn't really any other expression strong enough to describe it.

Hliðskjálf's information gathering capability was effective worldwide.

Gu Jie was aware that it was impossible to access information which only exists offline, however, in this day and age, information that couldn't be found using the network was practically nonexistent. No matter the complexity of the encryption, Hliðskjálf would decipher it.

Even quantum encrypted transmissions that "cannot be intercepted without possessing the correct decryption key" can be completely overturned and rendered powerless.

Who exactly invented this system? Who, and for what purpose, did this person send me this terminal? Even Gu Jie had first approached it with caution. Especially, when he discovered the hidden drawback in the system after having made a random search.

This drawback became clear all too soon.

Hliðskjálf records everything that the user investigates. The other Operators can also see it.

Still, they have no way of understanding who exactly made the search.

What they know is “what has been searched” and that’s it.

Gu Jie remembered the disappointment he felt back then. That the system’s creator would be able to see what exactly he searched for had been within his expectation. Even though the identities of the seven operators was supposed to remain a mystery with this system, Gu Jie wasn’t the kind of person to take someone’s words as gospel (At least, that’s what he thought of himself). The administrator of this system, the person who most certainly sent this terminal to him, could probably understand who did what. If you were to acknowledge this fact and still wanted to use the terminal, then the fact that other operators could also search your history shouldn’t matter that much.

Gu Jie didn’t have any hesitation in using Hliðskjálf.

Of course, he always had in mind the possibility that the system could be lying. He didn’t use it for every piece of information he wanted, however. There have been plenty of times where he collected information without relying on it, for the reasons stated above. But still, Hliðskjálf was an extremely convenient tool.

The problem he faced this time was that the Ten Master Clans might have predicted an attack if they had heard rumors of

someone making investigations on the conference's location. Gu Jie didn't underestimate the power of the Ten Master Clans. It was also possible that if a person among the Ten Master Clans also had access to Hliðskjálf, an ambush would be waiting for him. Of course, he was extremely careful as to what keywords he used during his search, and just because things went smoothly up until now didn't mean that this time would be the same.

Taking this into consideration, he had prepared various plans in the eventuality of an ambush.

Gu Jie's purpose wasn't to assassinate the Heads of the Ten Master Clans. Socially ending the Yotsuba Family that destroyed the Kunlunfang Institute was his goal.

While seeing off his dolls who were heading towards the town of Hakone in freight vehicles, Gu Jie sneered at the dark pleasure swelling from within himself. These dolls had been made from various poor citizens of Yokosuka.



Even though Lina was slightly surprised at her training's interruption, she obeyed the orders and headed towards the base's control room.

Her companion was the Commanding Officer of the Stars First Unit, Benjamin Canopus. He was the person Lina was relying on the most, Stars' Number 2.

"Ben, what do you think this is all about?"

Canopus shook his head at Lina, whose voice betrayed a certain anxiety.

"Truth be told, I have no idea. However, nothing in particular has happened recently so I doubt this is going to be a scolding or anything of the sort."

It wasn't that rare for Stars Members to break things during

their training. Things like training equipment, vehicles, and even facilities.

Considering the Stars were training for combat situations, a certain degree of destruction couldn't be helped, and this was even more valid when Commander-Class personnel were training. Lina had heard various complaints about the budget from the base's commander.

"I-I guess so."

Canopus looked at Lina with a smile while she was mumbling to herself words of encouragement. He had a daughter who was only 2 years younger than Lina, and because of that, he'd sort of developed parental feelings for her.

Without knowing that her subordinate was pointing such warm eyes towards her, Lina tightly clenched her fists and was psyching herself up.

— — Lina was unaware that her childish, cutesy gesture was further prodding Canopus' feelings.

Somehow successfully managing to put her uneasiness in a corner of her heart, she straightened her posture and adopted — — or at least she thought she had — — a proper expression for someone of the military, then knocked on the door of the Commander's Room. With a voice signaling her to come in, the lock of the door disengaged. Opening the door for herself, Lina instinctively raised her voice at the unexpected person in the room.

"Colonel Balance!?"

Right next to the commander of the base, who was behind his desk, was Colonel Virginia Balance sitting in a chair.

"Major, what are you doing. Come in."

Ordered by the irritated voice of the base's commander, Walker,

who also had the rank of Colonel, Lina moved in front of the desk in a hurry.

Canopus followed Lina with a composed attitude.

“Major Sirius, Major Canopus, at ease.”

Walker talked to the two people who saluted in front of his desk.

“Yes.”

Lina and Canopus both adopted the resting pose simultaneously.

“Colonel Balance has something to tell to the two of you.”

Saying so, Walker stood up.

“Then, Colonel Balance.”

Virginia stood up from her seat slightly after him.

“Colonel Walker. Thank you for allowing us to borrow your room for a few moments.”

Walker and Virginia saluted each other, then Walker went out of the room.

Locking the door using the remote control, Virginia finally faced Lina.

“Major Sirius, even though I think you already figured out the reason for my presence, it’s about yesterday’s matter.”

“Yes.”

As she said, Lina had guessed that this could be related to the request she had formulated yesterday.

“It is unfortunate, however, that the Major’s request cannot be granted.”

And the answer was as Lina had expected.

“We cannot carelessly allow the High Commander of the Stars, a Strategic-Class Magician to leave the country.”

Even though she had become accustomed to this reason, she still couldn't accept it deep in her heart. Despite the fact that she fulfilled her duty when she was sent to Japan last year, it didn't change the fact that she really wasn't fit for such a task.



Thinking about it, dealing with a terrorist threat in a friendly nation that was allowed to exist due to her own army's blunder was, in fact, considered an obligation of Stars. At the very least, those were Lina's thoughts on the matter. Even more so considering the chances of the Mastermind being a Magician were exceptionally high.

“— — That is the official reason on the matter, anyhow.”

However, Lina's displeasure at hearing this was about to skyrocket.

“The truth is, higher-ups are starting to wonder if the Major holds excess sympathy for Japan. Some are even fearing that the Major would consider exiling herself to Japan. In other words, there is an issue of trust.”

“Wait a moment! I have sworn loyalty to this nation, haven't I?!”

“I know.”

Virginia nodded with a calm expression at a Lina who instinctively reacted.

“I am not doubting the Major's loyalty. However, the fact you have Japanese lineage, and that you are still only a 17-year-old girl are causing them to doubt your allegiance.”

Lina was mortified. For her, having mostly an Anglo-Saxon face, experiencing what basically amounted to racism was a first.

Furthermore, considering it wasn't face-to-face discrimination but instead being whispered behind her back, her head was starting to boil from rage.

“I can't really find any other word than utter stupidity to qualify this.

However, it is specifically because such fools exist that we must avoid giving them any chances. Major, you are our nation's

greatest asset.”

Still, despite her enraged state of mind, Lina wasn't so far gone that she forgot her etiquette training and completely ignored the words of a superior. Those remarks had been spoken for her sake.

“It is impossible to send Major Sirius to Japan. However, it isn't like we can just leave this matter unattended.”

Virginia took in a breath and put power in her next sentence.

“That is why, we will send Major Canopus. Major Sirius, is this alright?”

“...Understood. I will be on standby for further orders.”

Swallowing her dissatisfaction, she saluted Virginia.

Virginia slowly nodded with a “very well”.

“In that case I will start to explain in more detail the mission to Major Canopus. Major Sirius, you may leave.”

“Yes. Then, pardon me, Colonel.”

Even though a part of Lina had wanted to explain things directly to Canopus, she had no confidence that doing so wouldn't generate jealousy, and that was why she obediently left.

“— —The situation is as stated above. Major Canopus, do you have any questions?”

After having explained to Canopus everything, from the stolen missiles to “The Seven Sages” information, Virginia inquired so.

“No, I don't, Colonel.”

It is unknown if there will indeed be an act of terrorism in Japan, and their only source of information had been the suspicious “Seven Sages” as well. Is there any dissatisfaction to being given a mission based on such ambiguous intelligence?

That had been the nuance in Virginia's earlier question, but neither a question nor a complaint came up from Canopus.

"I see. In that case, Major Canopus, there is something I would like to ask you."

"Yes, what is it?"

Even though Virginia carefully scrutinized Canopus' expression, not even a brow of his twitched. Feeling relief more than disappointment, Virginia carefully continued.

"Major Canopus, no, allow me to call you Major Benjamin Lowes here."

In the middle of Virginia's question, Canopus' eyebrows moved ever so slightly.

"The Major is blood-related to the Assistant of the Deputy Chief of Staff, Mr. Kane Lowes, right?"

"Yes. I think the Colonel is already aware but the Assistant of the Deputy Chief of Staff and my father are cousins, and he is my mother's cousin-in-law."

In other words, he is connected to the Lowes' Family both by blood and marriage, and with this kind of close relationship it wouldn't be exaggerated to say he's part of the upper echelons of society.

"To tell you the truth, the information brought to us by 'The Seven Sages' isn't limited to what I talked to you about earlier. I wish it was some kind of mistake but..."

Seeing Virginia hesitate, Canopus' expression moved a little.

His expression had a faint "It can't be?" feeling to it.

"It would appear that both the acquisition of the missiles and the terrorists leaving the country with them has been accommodated by the Assistant of the Deputy Chief of Staff, Mr.

Lowes.”

“...Are you saying that the Assistant of the Deputy Chief of Staff has been corrupted by the terrorists?”

To Canopus’ question, Virginia shook her head with a gloomy expression.

“If that was all there was to it, it wouldn’t be so complicated.”

“So that means there are other points of concern?”

Virginia frowned before opening her mouth to answer.

“Truth be told, the possibility that he and the Deputy Chief of Staff decided to make use of Jiedo Heigu is higher than the corruption hypothesis.”

While Canopus couldn’t hide his shock, Virginia decided to ask him something seemingly unrelated to the matter at hand.

“Major. What do you think about the Humanist Ideology?”

A popular opinion was that “humans have to live only using human abilities”, or at least that is the doctrine that the anti-Magician Catholic cults go by. Again, this was a mere excuse to agitate the anti-Magician sentiment.

However, Canopus’ answer would be even more concise.

“Mass hysteria. Still, to effectively use this, it would require influence as well as extreme prudence, I think.”

“As a Magician yourself, don’t you feel threatened by all of that?”

“If it seemed like it was about to escalate then I do think some measures should be thought of. We Magicians have no reason to bow down to false charges after all.”

“...You seem to possess pretty radical opinions.”

“Colonel, you’re misunderstanding something. I only think that

it would be dangerous for the citizens if society didn't allow them self-defense.

Those calumnious would-be victims incite racism and discrimination, something that has a high risk of breaking down any country, ours included, so we shouldn't take it lightly."

"I understand your stance. But that is not the problem at hand."

While saying this, Virginia had an unpleasant expression.

"Lowes, the Assistant of the Deputy Chief of Staff, has a different thought process but appears to have arrived at the same conclusion as you."

Even though Virginia was peering into Canopus' expression, he kept a cool, if somewhat brazen, expression.

"However, this is the country of freedom. It is a necessity to guarantee freedom of speech. No matter how good the cause, we cannot suppress it. At the very least, politicians think so."

"I agree with this, Colonel."

"...That is where the group Lowes belongs to decided to act, and they planned on giving the Humanists a target other than them, another country."

"So that they can perform their act of terrorism in Japan, and feel satisfied enough to not do it here as well?"

"Your sarcasm is unneeded, Major. This is something I don't agree with."

Virginia reproved with a sour look, a Canopus that was wearing a smile full of derision.

"Forgive my rudeness, Colonel."

Thinking that he had gone too far, Canopus genuinely apologized.

Seeing Canopus apologizing, Virginia realized that she might

have been too high-strung herself and decided to resume the conversation.

“Putting that aside, if the information given by ‘The Seven Sages’ is to be trusted, Lowes’ group’s objective isn’t even the terrorist act itself.”

“In other words?”

“It is nigh-impossible to limit the damage of a terrorist bombing to only the planned targets. Citizens will also unfortunately get involved in this.”

“That is...”

It was the first time since entering this room that Canopus wore such an expression.

“With this kind of weaponry, it would be impossible to harm a Magician unless they were taken by surprise. However, if you were to prepare a bomb using tens of those missiles’ destructive power, it would be difficult even for Members of the Ten Master Clans of Japan. Although a high-ranked Magician could definitely survive the explosion with a heatproof barrier, the civilians who happen to be in the area wouldn’t have a chance. If the explosion came from all directions, then even protecting the innocent would be next to impossible. As a result, only the civilians would suffer casualties. This was the scenario envisioned by ‘The Seven Sages’.”

“And since Magicians of Japan let innocent civilians die under their very eyes, the Humanists would take them as their new target. Their energy would be concentrated on Japan, thus, the anti-Magician movement in our own country would weaken. Moreover, the risk of Humanists resorting to radical measures out of frustration would decrease, is that it?”

“Indeed.”

Canopus' eyes had a sharp light to them.

“In that case, my mission will be to restrain Jiedo Heigu's act of terrorism before it happens?”

“What I ask of you is in fact much more than that.”

Virginia took a provocative stance.

“After last year's Parasite Affair, the Japanese authorities definitely won't see us in a good light. It will probably be impossible to capture Heigu on Japanese soil without alerting them. That will lead to an inquiry as to why we captured Heigu, and then they'll discover the weapons he planned on using had come from us.

However, if this act of terrorism actually succeeds, the origin of the used weapons will probably be discovered as well. I think that it would be much more disadvantageous to not stop it beforehand.

The difference between losing weapons and having them purchased from a black market by a terrorist versus letting a terrorist steal our weapons is quite vast.”

“...So we're going to let innocent Japanese citizens be massacred?”

“I have already secretly warned Japanese Magicians about Jiedo Heigu's group of terrorists.”

It wasn't as if Canopus could completely agree with Virginia. However, he couldn't dispute the fact that there was a need for the USNA Army to cover their position. Before being a Magician, Canopus was a military man. This fact was one of the biggest differences between him and the virtuous Lina.

“Major. Your duty is not related to the execution of Jiedo Heigu's act of terrorism, whether it is before it happens or afterwards, your mission is to assassinate him. His plans will

probably still be realized even if he is killed, but you need not worry about that. According to ‘The Seven Sages’, Heigu doesn’t seem to be using aerial transports. If he is on the sea, you may use ‘loud’ means to get the work done. Do not allow the Japanese to capture him.”

“Understood.”

Faced with the image of a saluting Canopus accepting the duty bestowed upon him, Virginia couldn’t help but feel guilty.

“Forgive me, Major. Even though we understand this kind of dirty work isn’t part of your duties, considering the possibility of our opponent being a peculiar Magician is high, we need to meet him with an eminent Magician of our own.”

Canopus stopped saluting and without putting on a tough act, shook his head.

“You need not worry yourself, Colonel. If anything, I would like to express my gratitude for choosing me. I do not want the High Commander... I don’t want Lina to suffer the pain of assassination work, as much as I can help it.”

Saluting once again, Canopus left the commander’s room.



Canopus arrived at the Japan-USNA Joint-Base of Yokosuka on January 29th, 1800 hours, Japan standard time.

Due to the frequent wars throughout the world over a 20-year period, most countries decided to call back all their troops to their respective territories, thus, things like the U.S. Forces’ Bases in Japan had disappeared. However, after the U.S became the USNA, the alliance between them and Japan had continued, but changed. Each country installed bases on their lands, bases that could be used freely by the other nation. The base of Yokosuka was one of those. (That being said, those bases’ activities were

close to nonexistent).

Of course, the fact that the Stars First Unit Commander, Canopus, came to Japan remained a secret. Immediately after arriving, without even going out of the base, he went on a destroyer ship towards the sea.

The warship that Canopus was on headed south, towards the Sagami Bay, and it passed by a small cruiser of 20 meters in the middle of the sea area between the Boso Peninsula and Oshima. Canopus jumped from the destroyer to the small cruiser when the two were close enough. This boat had been camouflaged using Optical Magic which could reflect even infrared rays. Although a faint shadow would probably appear on stratospheric surveillance cameras, discerning its identity should be impossible. With this, Canopus could be smuggled into the country safely.

This small cruiser was originally something that the USNA embassy possessed for leisure purposes, thus, to use it for information gathering, its power output and the hull's outer armor had been reinforced. Of course, cutting-edge sensors had been installed as well. Despite the fact that this cruiser didn't have many weapons, so long as Canopus was on it, this wouldn't be a problem at all.

Canopus turned the cruiser towards Sagami Bay. The cruiser went south, following the Izu Peninsula, then at Cape Irozaki turned north towards the Suruga Bay. Due in part to the slow speed at which he sailed, it was already nearing midnight when he found the target ship.

It was a small freighter which had its deck entirely covered with solar panels. When sailing, the arms on each of the sides of the hull would open up, like a Tobiuo's wings, and the thin solar films would then increase the power generation. This auxiliary power source uses a photocatalytic hydrogen production model

built into a regular fuel cell, and with nearly all the energy required coming from the sun, this type of freighter had become the main transport model in the latter half of the 21st century.

This freighter had been mentioned along with the presumed date at which Jiedo Heigu left the USNA. However, this ship was supposed to arrive yesterday in Japan. That is why the ship's inspection was unnecessary, so they decided to search the port at which it had anchored.

“Major, is it that ship?”

The captain of the ship who served as an officer in the USNA's Marine Corps talked to Canopus with a mix of awe and fear in his voice. As a temporary subordinate under his command for this mission, he had been told about Canopus' background. The Stars were already a unit whose reputation was close to that of legendary, and factor in that he was now talking to one of its best field officers, and you get that result. Albeit, this captain wasn't aware that “Canopus” the Number 2, was right behind “Sirius”, so he didn't need to be that tense. If he had been aware of Canopus' rank, it was quite possible that he wouldn't have been able to focus on his work to begin with.

To the captain's question, Canopus expressed a bitter smile. Seeing this smile without an ounce of intimidation or malice, the captain's tension softened a little.

“My apologies but ships really aren't my fort . You guys should have much more expertise on this subject than I do, right?”

Understanding that Canopus implicitly asked “Isn't this something you of all people should bring answers to?”, the captain straightened his spine.

“Pardon me, Sir. There is no mistake that this is the ship in question.”

“Of course, I will trust you on this matter.”

Canopus adopted a serious look and nodded, and a breath of relief escaped from the captain's lips.

"Captain."

"Yes, Major?"

The captain answered with a tone fitting of the serious expression Canopus was wearing.

"Keep that ship under surveillance. Since Heigu brought this ship all the way from Yokosuka to Numazu, he might be tempted to use it again to escape."

"Understood. I will immediately contact local agents."

"We will continue observing the vessel tonight."

"Major, aren't you going to the mainland?"

"We're already past the planned time for landing. If we are to successfully complete this mission, we must avoid drawing attention as much as possible."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Nodding silently, Canopus turned his attention towards the freighter.



Persuaded by Virginia, Lina graciously decided to give up on going to Japan. She thought that sending Canopus wasn't a mistake. Thinking about it, if they were to exclude Heavy Metal Burst, he might even be stronger than her, Sirius, since he was a veteran combat Magician. Lina kept repeating to herself that he never failed his duties.

Still, Lina had come to a point where it was unbearable to not do anything.

"...It's true, I cannot do anything. I have to obediently remain here.

However, if it's about warning a fri... an acquaintance, then there should be no problem!"

Despite the fact that no one was listening to her monologue, she felt the need to hurriedly correct herself before she could utter the word "friend".

Looking left and right with a red face, no matter how you looked at it, it was her excessive self-consciousness.

Was she aware that her actions were a bit childish? Lina cleared her throat— —which was quite a cutesy act in and of itself anyway— —and looked towards the vision console.

It was currently two hours past midnight. In other words, that meant Lina had been worrying until that time, but it also meant that it was just six o'clock in Japan. Even though that wasn't planned at all, it was just what she hoped for.

Although she had decided to phone them, if she gave herself the time to hesitate, it would have been too late. Lina psyched herself up in front of the console and dialed Miyuki's number.

After five blips, the screen's light turned on. Looking at the display, her rival appeared, and compared to a year ago, her beauty had even further increased.

[My! Lina, it's been a while.]

Neither envy, fear, reverence nor admiration transpired from her gaze, and she was only looking at the person named "Angelina". Lina remembered the illusion of the water concealing her heart melting away.

"Hello, Miyuki. It's been awhile indeed. Is everything going well?"

[Yes, thanks to you. Did you lose some weight I wonder? Are you alright? Aren't you busy with your work?]

Calling her role as the Stars' High Commander, the duty of the

Sirius, as just “work”. This spontaneous boldness gave Lina pleasant feelings.

“My weight actually increased you know? Maybe I became more muscular.”

[Hmm... It looks like you did shape up a bit. I’m a little jealous.]

“Miyuki... I told you that when someone such as yourself talks like that, it sounds like sarcasm. Moreover, what’s up with you? Getting even more beautiful like that. When are you going to feel satisfied and stop?”

[I could say the same to you, it really sounds like sarcasm when you say such things... If it seems like I look beautiful, then it’s only because of Onii-sama.]

Lina suddenly had dejected feelings. Really, if the situation had been different... such thoughts wandered in Lina’s head, feelings of disappointment.

“...Ah that’s true, Miyuki is now engaged to Tatsuya, right. Congratulations.”

[Thank you very much, Lina. Still, the news spread pretty fast it seems.]

“Well, we’re talking about the ‘Princess’ of the Yotsuba. It’s normal to bear an interest.”

[Is that true? Then could it be that Lina called to congratulate us?]

Lina was taken aback by Miyuki’s happy smile. And with this she remembered the purpose of her call.

“Umm, no, sorry. It’s not really for that.”

Hearing Lina’s apology, Miyuki slightly cocked her head to the side, but rather than being ill-humored, she was puzzled.

[Oh my, in that case, is it an important matter?]

Lina wanted to ask why Miyuki would show her such a cutesy face, but refrained from doing so and swallowed her retort.

“Indeed. It’s probably a very important matter.”

[...Would it be better if I called Onii-sama I wonder?]

Thinking for less than a second, Lina nodded her head at Miyuki’s proposal.

“Yes. It would be better for Tatsuya to hear this as well.”

[Please, wait for a moment.]

The screen entered suspension mode.

It took roughly three seconds for the display to turn on again, and for Miyuki’s beautiful figure to reappear.

[Lina, long time no see.]

“Yes, Tatsuya. It has been a long time.”

Tatsuya was sitting next to Miyuki. To Lina’s surprise, the distance between Tatsuya and Miyuki wasn’t zero.

[I guess this would be the time where we slowly talk about how things have been going around each other, but you seem to have important business to talk about. Let’s leave the friendship talk for the next time, then. What did you want to consult us about.]

“You haven’t changed, Tatsuya. I must say, I like that straightforward personality of yours.”

Immediately after saying this, Lina thought “Damn it”. Using “I like” to qualify an aspect of Tatsuya while Miyuki is right next to him, isn’t that like pouring fuel on the already lit fire that is called “Miyuki’s jealousy”.

However, once again unexpectedly, Miyuki remained calm and

composed.

This was incredibly eerie to Lina.

“Umm... Miyuki. Aren’t you angry?”

[Eh, about what?]

Miyuki replied with a face that explicitly told she had no idea what Lina was talking about.

From Miyuki’s point of view, it was natural that other women would be attracted to him, or at least find likeable points about him, so there was no reason to get angry about such trivial matters. Lina wasn’t aware of that fact however.

“Well, let’s forget about it.”

If she doesn’t care about it then there’s no reason to press the issue.

Thanks to that, Lina was able to get down to business.

“Tatsuya, Miyuki, do you remember about ‘The Seven Sages’?”

Tatsuya and Miyuki looked at each other.

[We remember.]

The one who answered was Tatsuya.

[Have you received some information from those Seven Sages?]

While picturing Raymond Clark’s face, Tatsuya asked Lina this question. There should be no way for her to know about “The Seven Sages” identity. Never mind that Raymond was one of them.

“Spot on.”

As Lina didn’t have any telepathy or unusual mind powers, she couldn’t see what image went through Tatsuya’s mind at the moment. Lina also didn’t have observation powers on a level where she could see through Tatsuya’s poker face.

“According to the information we received from them, remnants of Dahan have planned an act of terrorism in Japan.”

Having received an answer to her own question, she answered Tatsuya’s.

“The Mastermind is someone named Jiedo Heigu. His Chinese name is Gu Jie. He is a presumed surviving Magician from the Kunlunfang Institute... What’s wrong Miyuki?”

Miyuki was about to raise her voice but quickly held it in, and having seen that, Lina inquired for the reason of her response.

[The name Kunlunfang Institute holds a very special meaning for us... Forgive me for interrupting you.]

The truth was that they had heard this name already from Raymond, that he was another member of “The Seven Sages”, Miyuki quickly covered up with a lie as Tatsuya didn’t have any reaction.

“Ah, I see...”

Lina knew about the connection between the Yotsuba and the Kunlunfang Institute. Considering it normal for the Yotsuba Successor to react vividly at the mention of a “Kunlunfang Institute Survivor”, Lina didn’t press the issue.

“You might have already guessed, but we think that the possibility of the Yotsuba being Heigu’s target is pretty high.”

[I see. Indeed, this line of thought seems to be the most plausible. Is that the reason Lina contacted Miyuki?]

“W-well, yeah, that’s how it is.”

Hearing Tatsuya say “I think the same”, Lina started to blush without any particular reason.

[It’s true that both Miyuki and I are related to this matter. There is also the possibility that Miyuki would be directly

targeted.]

“Tatsuya... Don’t talk as if it’s someone else’s problem. There is a possibility that you could become a target as well.”

To a Lina who stated so with an amazed voice,

[It would be convenient if I was their target.]

Tatsuya answered with a fearless expression.

“...Well, I guess so. If they make you their target, I guess things would be wrapped up in short order.”

Hearing his answer, Lina instinctively consented.

Even Lina didn’t understand the extent of Tatsuya’s true power. Even though, at first, she had thought that he was a Magician skilled in Mental-Interference Magic, she came to doubt that assessment during their final battle with the Parasites.

In a word, Tatsuya was, and still is a mysterious Magician. However, if anything, Lina couldn’t question his ability. Lina couldn’t even imagine how Magicians who had no choice but to rely on the little missiles they stole would go about dealing Tatsuya.

[Lina, what’s wrong? You have the face of someone who just lost all her worries.]

Lina violently jumped up at Miyuki casually revealing her thoughts.

Why was she feeling so relieved after confirming that Tatsuya wouldn’t be done in so easily.

“No, well, you know.”

Hampered by the noisy sound her heart was making, she couldn’t form a proper sentence.

“You see, how should I say it...”

Looking at the wry smile of Tatsuya, Lina remembered how irritating it could be.

“Ah, geez! See, to sum up, I just wanted to.”

To tell you about Heigu, was what she was about to say, but she managed to seal her lips right before saying it.

[I see... In other words, you were in such a hurry to tell us about Heigu that once you did what you called for, you felt relieved, is that it?]

“Yeah, that’s right!”

Lina showed quite the grand reaction to the figurative lifeboat that Tatsuya sent her.

“Ah...”

While Lina was rapidly getting redder,

[I see. Lina, thank you very much.]

Tatsuya ignored it and expressed his thanks to Lina.

“Y-you don’t need to thank me! I just thought that if I didn’t tell you guys I’d have trouble sleeping, that’s all! Well then, Tatsuya, Miyuki, good night!”

Forgetting the time difference between their countries, Lina cut off the transmission after rapidly saying her goodbye.

She violently took off her clothes and slipped between the sheets without even putting on her pajamas.

Chapter 5

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A week had passed since Tatsuya and Miyuki had received that phone call from Lina.

Lina's communication had been last Tuesday, and since today was Monday, six days had passed. There were still no clues about the terrorist attack or Heigu. This was the case not only for Tatsuya, but also Maya and Canopus as well, none of whom had made progress in the search for Heigu.

Furthermore, today was February 4th. The Master Clans Conference would be held in two days' time.

The Master Clans Conference is the summit for the Japanese Magic Community. Even for Ancient Magicians who didn't even accept the Ten Master Clans as the Leaders of Magicians, they couldn't deny the influence of the Master Clans Conference. Especially this year, the Ten Master Clans Selection Meeting would be held on the second day. It would decide the next Ten Master Clans for the next 4 years, which heightened the Magician's concerns even more.

The students of First High, too, were restless since early morning.

Though they were only High School Students, being Magicians themselves, they couldn't help being concerned. Especially for people who are related to the Ten Master Clans and the 18

Assistant Houses, or people associated with the Ten Master Clans whose probability for selection was low, were anxious to the point of being incapable of concentrating in school.

As Miyuki entered Class 2-A, the students reacted by freezing in shock, and silence fell upon the room.

“Good morning, Shizuku, Honoka.”

Miyuki greeted Shizuku in the seat in front and Honoka standing adjacent to Shizuku. With a greeting, she removed the spell on her classmates.

“Miyuki!? Why did you come to school!?”

Honoka let out a voice similar to a scream. With that, Class 2-A was filled with the loud buzz of commotion.

“Why... Isn’t today a weekday. For a High School Student to come to school is a given, isn’t it? Or since when have I been ostracized by my friends? Or could it be bullying?”

Miyuki tilted her head with one hand on her cheek, making a troubled expression.

In response to the unexpected counter-attack, Honoka was bewildered.

Shizuku too had a face which indicated that she had no idea as to how she could assist her.

However, the troubles of the two did not continue for long.

“I apologize, that was a joke.”

A quick smile slipped out of Miyuki that turned into a giggle.

“I thought you would be absent? Today’s the Master Clans Conference after all.”

“Y-Yeah!”

Honoka who followed-up, anxiously drew closer to Miyuki.

“Miyuki, is it fine to not go to the Conference? After all, this time, they’re holding the selection meeting, too? Since you’re the successor, ah...”

Honoka covered her mouth with her hand, showing an expression that she messed up.

The classmates who heard this, turned away all at once.

“Even though I would prefer it if you weren’t so bothered about it...”

Miyuki put on a smile of embarrassment. But the classmates who, until recently, were concerned about her, couldn’t help but worry about her attendance.

“So Miyuki, is it okay to not go?”

Following Miyuki’s statement, Shizuku asked a rather bland question to break the sour mood.

“Well, I wasn’t invited to go.”

As Miyuki answered while smiling, gazes which seemed to say “Eh?” gathered around her.

“I wonder if Honoka and Shizuku don’t know this. The venue of the Master Clans Conference is a secret to everyone except the attendees. For the 18 Assistant Houses attending the Selection Meeting, as of today, they are only informed about the approximate location, with the specifics about the room being used still unknown.”

“But Miyuki is...”

To Honoka revealing her surprise, Miyuki pleasantly smiled.

It paralyzed Honoka’s tongue and throat.

“I wasn’t invited. Thus, I don’t even know where the meeting will take place. It’s not that I take no interest in the contents of the meeting but if I don’t even know the general location, there’s

no way I can go, right?”

“That’s true.”

In place of Honoka who had started blushing quietly, Shizuku nodded in agreement to Miyuki’s words.

At the same time, something similar was happening in Class 2-E.

“Hmm? Tatsuya-san, why did you come to school?”

“Good morning, Mizuki. To greet me with such a question in the morning.”

“Eh, ah, no, about that... I’m sorry.”

It wasn’t that Tatsuya particularly felt uncomfortable but for him to say such a thing was natural. Tatsuya had never taken long periods of absence from school, so to be questioned, “Why did you come to school”, on a Monday, the question coming out of nowhere was nothing less than a rarity.

But on this day, it wasn’t just Mizuki who seemed to have forgotten her common sense.

“Tatsuya-kun, is it alright for you to come to school!?”

Opening the window noisily, Erika cried out loud without any prior greeting.

“Erika... why do you all want me to be absent?”

The sight of Tatsuya frowning in displeasure, beside an embarrassed Mizuki entered Erika’s sight.

“A, ahahahahahahaha.”

Realizing her attitude to be a little senseless, she revealed a false smile.

Some things were impossible, even for her.

“But still, Tatsuya. Isn’t today the start of the Master Clans Conference? Is it fine to not go there?”

Fortunately for Erika, she wasn’t the only one who dared to venture into the minefield.

“Why would you want to know?”

In response to Leo’s question, without trying to play the fool, Tatsuya curiously asked a question of his own.

“I think that to not be interested would be strange.”

As Erika replied to Tatsuya’s question, Leo nodded his head in agreement.

“These two are really getting along now,” Tatsuya thought while putting out another question.

“As I said, why? Well, it does seem the amount of interested people is rather numerous but...”

While saying that, Tatsuya glanced backwards, and his classmates hurriedly averted their eyes.

“If you think that my relation to the Yotsuba Family is a good enough reason, then you would be mistaken. Just because a person is blood-related to the Ten Master Clans does not mean he or she can participate in the Master Clans Conference. For example, as the successor of the Juumonji Family, Juumonji-senpai attending is a given but, Saegusa-senpai is unlikely to be attending.”

“...So that’s how it works?”

Leo wore a face that lost interest. Conversely, Erika had an expression that seemed to express her content.

“Therefore, even if I did know the location of the conference, I’m not interested in going. In the middle of the conference, rather than to be bored waiting, it would be more beneficial to go to

school and take lessons.”

“But still, aren’t you interested in the contents discussed in the Master Clans Conference?”

“I’m not allowed to attend, so even if I wanted to go now, I have no way of doing so. All the results of the conference will be publicized. There’s no way for me to know the process of the discussion.”

“Haa... in the end, we only need to follow the announcement huh?”

“That is indeed the case.”

If the discussion ended here, it would have been resolved under the category of small talk.

“In the end, powerless small fry Magicians can only follow something you decided? That sounds like something Ten Master Clans-sama would say.”

A loud monologue resounded throughout the quiet classroom which had been listening to Tatsuya.

The source was diagonally behind Tatsuya. More accurately, it was diagonally behind Mizuki.

“What? You have something you want to say?”

Using her sharp eyes, Erika glared at Hirakawa Chiaki, the student who had voiced such words.

Chiaki didn’t answer Erika’s question. If that was the extent of her reaction, it would have ended fine. But, Chiaki looked away.

Erika’s eyes twitched upwards at the provocation.

Erika, who was at the window, walked in through the door. Then, she headed towards Chiaki.

“Wait a moment! Chiba-san, calm down!”

The one who hastily blocked Erika's way was a male student.

Not yielding to Erika's spirit, he tried to resolve the situation peacefully as if he was the class rep. The student in question was Tomitsuka, a man who fit the definition of a worry-wart.

"Tomitsuka-kun, could you stand down? I have something to say to that girl."

"No, that will definitely end badly!"

Tomitsuka, who certainly understood what Erika meant by "something to say", tried desperately to dissuade Erika.

But, as if to ruin his efforts, Chiaki stood up behind Tomitsuka.

"Isn't it true?"

"What?"

Over the shoulder of Tomitsuka, the two girls glared at each other.

"Chiba-san, err, lessons will be starting soon...?"

Acting like a shield for Chiaki, Tomitsuka still tried to arbitrate the issue.

"There's still 5 minutes."

But was tragically shot down.

"So, Hirakawa-san, answer me?"

The intensity of Erika's gaze was such that it could even cause a grown man to shudder.

Chiaki's knees were currently trembling, but she still bravely replied.

"The fact he's related to the Ten Master Clans! Are you telling me I'm wrong?!"

"And? It may be true that Tatsuya-kun is related to the Ten

Master Clans, so what? Even if someone's parents are from the Ten Master Clans, the children aren't necessarily involved as well."

"Sophistry. Chicanery. Being a member of the Yotsuba Family behind our backs, he hid it and deceived us!"

"Perhaps a young girl who was fortunately brought up in a normal household may not know, but children who do not take their parents' surnames is not a rare occurrence in the Magician Community."

Chiaki's tongue was tied and she was unable to reply due to the fact she knew Erika was telling the truth. That fact was common knowledge.

"Wha-Why..."

"Nn? If you have something you want to say, just be out with it."

Erika's contemptuous tone angered Chiaki. Rage broke any reason left in her.

"Chiba-san, why are you getting angry because of that guy!? Do you like him or something!?"

The classmates who had been spectating the argument frowned. This was because Chiaki's reasoning was sorely lacking in dignity for a High School Student. To put it crudely, "Whether someone likes someone or not, what does it matter? Aren't you being an idiot?" was what they felt.

"Are you an idiot?"

Erika spoke those thoughts aloud.

"Do I like Tatsuya-kun? I'm not so reckless."

Hearing Erika's objection the students of Class 2-E tilted their necks in puzzlement.

"To be a love rival against Miyuki, I've seen the horrors it can

bring. I'd rather not risk my life in such a dangerous scenario for love."

If Miyuki had heard her, the situation wouldn't have ended so simply.

Even sympathizing with that statement would be dangerous. But, excluding Tatsuya, Chiaki and Tomitsuka— —In short the spectating students of Class 2-E— —deeply nodded in agreement at Erika's words.

"Ah, to seriously argue against such a dolt, I must look like quite the fool."

Saying that, Erika briskly walked out.

"Tatsuya-kun, I'll be returning. See you next time."

"Ah, see you next time."

Returning a wave to Tatsuya, she smiled and left Class 2-E.

The end result was that Chiaki successfully drove off Erika.

But Chiaki was left standing and trembling in embarrassment.



For High School Students, the conference might seem like something casual, but for the participating adults, the Master Clans Conference is nothing less than a serious duel, which concerned their very lives.

The venue was in Hakone, held in a rented conference room in a luxurious hotel. As the start of the meeting approached, the seats of the round table were filled.

Casually dressed in a copper brown sweater, that wrapped his tall and sunburnt body, was the cutthroat Head of the Ichijou Family, Ichijou Gouki. Residing in Kanazawa, he had recently celebrated his 42nd birthday a few days ago. His occupation was being a Seabed Mining Company President.

With her hair tied up, and donning an elegant kimono, was the Head of the Futatsugi Family, Futatsugi Mai. Residing in Ashiya, 55 years old. She was a major shareholder of a Food Industry Company.

Wearing a jacket on top of a polo shirt, coupled with a rough look, was the petite yet athletic middle-aged Head of the Mitsuya Family, Mitsuya Gen. Residing in Atsugi, 53 years old. He, for lack of a nice way of putting it, was an International Arms Dealer.

Enveloped in a wine red formal one piece was the beautiful Head of the Yotsuba Family, Yotsuba Maya. No matter how one looked at it she looked to be only 30 years of age, but she is actually 47 years old.

Neatly dressed but also having a plain appearance, like an unrefined businessman was the Head of the Itsuwa Family, Itsuwa Isami. Residing in Uwajima, 49 years old. He was the director and the owner, of a Shipping Company.

Short, yet straight, brown hair, and wearing a pantsuit, the glamorous woman was the Head of the Mutsuzuka Family, Mutsuzuka Atsuko. Residing in Sendai, 29 years old. She was the owner of a Geothermal Power Plant Excavation Company.

Somewhat old fashioned and reminiscent of the elite businessmen of the 1980's to 1990's, was the Head of the Saegusa Family, Saegusa Kouichi. Residing in Tokyo, 48 years old. Wearing lightly colored spectacles, even indoors, was a characteristic trait of his. He is a Venture Capitalist.

Wearing a three-piece suit without a tie and his hair gathered up, was the Head of the Yatsushiro Family, Yatsushiro Raizou. Residing in Fukuoka, 31 years old. He was a lecturer in at a university and a major shareholder of a Multi-Communication Company.

Dressed in an overseas brand three-piece, the white-haired gentleman was the Head of the Kudou Family, Kudou Makoto. Residing in Ikoma, 64 years old. He was the shareholder, investor and creditor of various Military Industrial Companies.

The bald man in full formal Japanese attire, a haori hakama, was the Head of the Juumonji Family, Juumonji Kazuki. Residing in Tokyo, 44 years old. He was the owner of a Civil Engineering and Construction Company that has a connection with the National Defense Force.

These were the current Ten Master Clans, and their respective Heads. In addition, only Juumonji Kazuki was accompanied by his son, Katsuto.

Once all the members were present, the door closed. The one who locked the door was the youngest of them all, Katsuto.

“Juumonji-dono, has your condition improved?”

The first to speak was the eldest, Kudou Makoto.

All Families were equal within the Ten Master Clans. There was no hierarchy of any sort. Such a belief was obvious due to the usage of a round table in the hotel.

But to carry out a meeting without a chairperson was uncondusive. So among the Family Heads, it had become an unwritten law that the eldest would have the role of facilitating the meeting.

Makoto inquiring about Juumonji Kazuki's health condition was due to the fact that previously he had been absent from the Master Clans Conference, with Katsuto going in his place. For the other Heads, it had been actually 3 years since their last meeting with Kazuki.

“In regards to that, I have an announcement to make to everyone.”

Hearing Makoto's words, Kazuki stood up. Speaking while seating was the standard in the Master Clans Conference so his attitude seemed to give the feeling that it was an important announcement.

"This may be sudden but, I, Juumonji Kazuki, will use this meeting as a means of handing over the seat of Head of the Juumonji Family to my son Katsuto. With that in mind, I would like all of you present to bear witness."

Exchanging glances with surrounding members, while staring at Kazuki, each Head had varied responses but, not one of them freely chattered.

"That is quite a brash thing to say."

Makoto said on behalf of all the other members present.

"I have been considering this for quite some time. Having reached adulthood, I believe Katsuto has also been thinking about it. Occupying the seat of the Head and having no ability as a Magician... such a thing, not only speaking for the Juumonji Family, but for the Ten Master Clans, would not be desirable. Thus I've made such a decision."

"You mean to say, you can no longer use magic?"

The person who asked this was Ichijou Gouki. In the Master Clans Conference, difficult topics that had to be broached were numerous.

"Since 3 years ago, I have been suffering from a disease that has caused a decline in my magic power. 2 years ago, I was at the stage where I could no longer fight, as such virtually left all the duties of being Head to Katsuto. And then 3 months ago, I lost all use of my magical abilities."

Kazuki's explosive message reverberated amongst everyone.

"A sickness that causes a decline in magic? This is the first time

I heard of such a thing. I know this is impolite but, as a Magician this is a big problem. Do you have more information? Are there no cures?”

The person asking was Saegusa Kouichi. For him, when in the Master Clans Conference, talking came first and the debate second.

“Saegusa-dono, such a worry is unnecessary. For it is unique to the Juumonji Family.”

“Unique only to your family? Are you sure?”

“Saegusa-dono.”

As Kouichi tried to question further, he was softly chided by Maya.

“It would be better if you refrain from asking anything more than that.”

“That is true. Do not pry into the business of other families. That is a rule not only followed by the Ten Master Clans, but the Magic Community as a whole. It is as Yotsuba-dono says, shall we cease such questioning? Juumonji-dono has already said that Magicians of other families will not catch such a disease, isn’t that good enough?”

Futatsugi Mai followed up on Maya’s opinion. After Kudou Makoto, as the next eldest, she held the role of being the arbitrator during the Master Clans Conference.

“Very well, I understand. Juumonji-dono, I apologize for my actions.”

Kouichi withdrew quietly. Let alone Maya, he had no reason to be stubborn towards Mai.

“No, I don’t really mind it.”

As Kouichi replied as such, Kazuki faced Maya and Mai and

showed gratitude with his eyes.

“Now then, everyone. Are there any opinions about the Juumonji’s Succession?”

About Kazuki’s question,

“Even without our presence, I know it would be fine for the Juumonji’s Family matters to be settled internally, but... I have no objections. I would happily bear witness to the succession of Katsuto-dono.”

“I too have no objections. Rather, I think it’s quite an honor. I would happily be a witness.”

As Maya raised her volume, Mutsuzuka Atsuko continued. Atsuko had an admiration for Maya, so often when disputes broke out, she would often take Maya’s side. One of the Yotsuba Branch Families, the Shibata Family’s eldest son, Katsushige commuted to Sendai’s Fifth High School. Such a thing was partially due to the friendliness of Atsuko to Maya.

“I have no intention to protest against other family’s succession matters. I wish Katsuto-dono the best of luck in his future role as the Head. It’s unfortunate for Kazuki-dono, but, for putting forth so much effort for the Japanese Magic Community, thank you for your hard work.”

Perhaps because of what happened earlier, Kouichi actively showed his support.

With both Maya and Kouichi accepting Kazuki’s proposal in concert, the remaining Heads congratulated Katsuto, and gave words of appreciation for Kazuki.

“Now Katsuto-dono. As the new Head of the Juumonji Family, please sit in that seat.”

Lastly, Makoto prompted Katsuto, recognizing him as the Head of the Juumonji Family.

Sent by Katsuto to this room, Kazuki left the room, Katsuto sat in the seat for the Head of the Juumonji Family. With that adjustment, the Master Clans Conference began.

“Then Ichijou-dono.”

“The mountain recesses of the Hokuriku-San'in regions have seen no movement that might become a problem. There have been no signs observed that the New Soviet Union and the Great Asian Alliance are working on an intrusion.”

Prompted by Makoto, Gouki made a report on the observations of the activities of opposing governments.

“Mutsuzuka-dono.”

“The Tōhoku region has seen no irregularities.”

“Futatsugi-dono.”

“Hanshin is as usual. Should there be any eyesores, I will immediately set out to clean it up.”

“...Futatsugi-dono, be careful. Itsuwa-dono.”

“No movements have been observed in the Shikoku region.”

“Yatsushiro-dono.”

“Much like the Hanshin region, the Kitakyushu region is as usual.”

“Is that so? Keep a look out and be careful.”

This report was in regards to the activities in the areas which each family was in charge of. The Hokkaidō, Ogasawara and Okinawa regions were under the jurisdiction of the Magicians from the National Defense Forces, even the Ten Master Clans could not raise a hand so easily.

Other than those areas, the mountain areas of the Hokuriku-

San'in region is under the Ichijou Family, Tōhoku the Mutsuzuka Family, Hanshin-Chūgoku the Futatsugi Family, Shikoku the Itsuwa Family, the Kyushu area excluding Okinawa was under the Yatsushiro Family, and Kyōto—Nara-Shiga-Kii the Kudou Family. Furthermore, the Mitsuya Family actively provided the know-how to the Magicians of the Defense Forces and of the applications of the Third Research Laboratory, while cooperating with the other Houses of the “Three”.

The Saegusa Family as well as the Juumonji Family were in charge of the Kantō region, including Izu, while the Yotsuba Family is in charge of Tōkai as well as the Gifu-Nagano Prefectures.

“Saegusa-dono.”

“The Kantō region has had an increase in anti-Magician activities. It's not at the level where interference is necessary, but I think sooner or later we will have to make a move. Also, there was some suspicious activity in Yokosuka. Perhaps they are planning sabotage.”

“Does Juumonji-dono share the same thoughts?”

“In regards to the anti-Magician movement, the Juumonji Family and I share the same opinion as Saegusa-dono. In regards to the saboteur, it is unfortunate, but we couldn't catch him.”

“Hmm. Regarding the so-called Humanists, let's discuss this later. Then, Yotsuba-dono.”

“While absent in Kantō, the Humanists have begun encroaching upon Tōkai. Now then, Saegusa-dono, Juumonji-dono.”

“Yotsuba-dono, what is it?”

Addressed by Maya, Kouichi answered with a smile. In that

smile, elements other than sociability were slightly mixed in. The only time Kouichi would show a fluctuation of any emotion was when the other member of the conversation was Maya.

For Maya, she had never directed a gaze of concern towards Kouichi.

No matter what, she would always return a look that seemed to say whatever.

“There is suspicious activity in Izu. We propose tighter surveillance.”

Now was no exception. Glancing coldly and uninterestedly at Kouichi, the eye that seemed to ask why are you looking at me, then only gave a perfunctory reply.

“I understand. If you don’t mind, could you explain a little as to what kind of activity it was.”

The one who said so in a dignified voice was Katsuto. Though surrounded by seniors, he seemed to be indifferent to such a fact.

“I don’t mind. Last week, a small cargo ship that arrived at the Yokosuka Port via the North American route is currently anchored at the Numazu Port. We were observing that cruiser owned by the USNA Embassy. As of now, the embassy’s cruiser disappeared but, our surveillance of the cargo ship is still continued.

“Yotsuba-dono, do you know of the whereabouts of the cruiser?”

Kouichi posed another question towards Maya.

“I don’t know. Perhaps it is at sea.”

Though it seemed like Maya gave an irresponsible reply, originally it was supposed to be Kouichi that was responsible for investigating. The Juumonji Family is better suited for combat. so even though both were in charge of the Kanto-Izu region, the

Saegusa Family was in charge of the investigation work.

“Very well, our family will investigate this issue. With the increase in anti-Magician activity... if that cargo ship has humanist passengers, then the USNA authorities might chase it as well. Numazu is Yotsuba-dono’s territory but, the issue is that ship entered the harbor of Yokosuka. Our family will continue to pursue this as well.”

Obviously understanding that, Kouichi summarized the situation flawlessly.

“Eh, I look forward to working with you.”

Nodding, Maya did not further discuss the topic of Heigu’s boat and Canopus’ cruiser.

As the regular reports concluded, the conference room’s atmosphere changed.

“Kudou-dono. Firstly, I have something I would like ask about this location.”

The remark which heralded trouble was made by Kouichi.

“Saegusa-dono, go ahead.”

With a sighing expression of patience, Makoto prompted Kouichi to go ahead.

“Very well, thank you for sparing me some time.”

Saying that, Kouichi faced Maya.

Once again, a certain mood drifted from Mutsuzuka Atsuko to Yatsushiro Raizou. Kouichi (with a gentlemanly attitude) turned to Maya, something that could be said to be a familiar sight in the Master Clans Conference.

“Yotsuba-dono, congratulations on your decision about your successor.”

“Thank you.”

Both Kouichi and Maya had fake smiles plastered on their faces.

Beneath the façade, Kouichi had a provocative glimmer in his eye, while Maya returned a cold gaze. No matter how one looked at it, both seemed ready to fight.

“But, regarding your son’s engagement issue, I’m afraid I cannot agree to that.”

“Why? If I remember correctly, personal issues like marriage have no necessity to seek approval from the Master Clans Conference. Am I wrong?”

Before any voices of approval could be interleaved, Maya rebutted Kouichi.

“Indeed if it was only a marriage, I wouldn’t be saying this. But when the possibility of ruining potential talent exists, it’s a different story.”

With the exception of Kouichi and Maya, everyone’s eyes focused on Ichijou Gouki.

Gouki’s mouth was twisted into a bent shape, with arms folded. His face seemed to voice his thoughts “In such a place and time...”

How does consanguineous marriage impact a Magician’s quality? Such research has not made much progress, and thus is a topic yet to be concluded. Some researchers have claimed it is harmful, while some have claimed it beneficial. But, above the fact that the risk of genetic abnormalities is assumed, it is considered that it is better that marriages with blood relationships too close be avoided. Actually among the Numbers, the law tends to discourage even marriage among cousins.

Kudou Makoto interlaced his fingers on the table, closing his

eyes. From the side, he looked like he was deep in thought.

“It’s just an inclination, it is not forbidden. There are real examples too.”

The one who refuted Kouichi in a weary voice was not Maya.

“Eh. Just as Yatsushiro-dono said, even among the 28 Houses, there are sanguineous couples. But in that case, they have different mothers. Considering Yotsuba-dono’s current case, it cannot be discussed on an equal basis.”

“Even if they weren’t cousins, you can go back to the grandparents and find the father is related by being cousins with the other’s husband. Even when the blood relations are distant, the element of risk still exists in sanguineous marriage, doesn’t it?”

This time it was Mutsuzuka Atsuko who refuted Kouichi’s claim.

“The risk is never zero. The only question is to what degree, Mutsuzuka-dono.”

But, Atsuko’s remark could not cause Kouichi to falter.

“The reason I object to the Yotsuba Family’s Successors’ engagement, is that they are monozygotic twins, with very close blood ties. No different from a marriage between half-siblings. Is that not the case?”

Atsuko did not reply. Kouichi ignoring his emotional intention, his logic held persuasion.

“A marriage between cousins may be recognized by law. But if it becomes a marriage between half-siblings, then it could even be called a circumvention of the law.”

“Saegusa-dono, that is going too far.”

Futatsugi Mai gently restrained the extreme phrase,

circumvention of the law. But, Mai didn't seem to show any intention to oppose Kouichi's claim.

"Apologies. I've indeed gone too far. Please forgive me, Yotsuba-dono."

Maya ignored Kouichi's apology.

"So in the end, what do you want to say Saegusa-dono?"

Ignoring everything, she cut straight to the point to seek what Kouichi's request was.

Stopping even Kouichi's smooth tongue, Kouichi's face in the direction between Itsuwa Isami and Mutsuzuka Atsuko, staring at Maya.

"What I seek is very simple. I believe the successor to the Yotsuba Family, Shiba Miyuki-dono, and Shiba Tatsuya-dono's engagement should be cancelled."

Maya returned Kouichi's stare.

Both Maya and Kouichi's line of sight met.

Hidden beneath his light colored lenses, the emotion that crossed his remaining left eye was either joy or hatred.

"My apologies. May I add in something?"

The person who cut into the high tension between the two was Ichijou Gouki.

"Yotsuba-dono, though our family has yet to receive an answer from yours, I should admit that what Saegusa-dono has said was influenced by us. As such, could you please consider our request?"

"The issue regarding the request for the engagement between your family's Masaki-dono and Miyuki?"

"Yes."

Returning a face of fortitude, Maya languidly sighed deeply.

“Masaki-dono is the Ichijou Family’s successor is he not? Miyuki has also been confirmed as the successor of our family. Even if I put aside the fact that it is inappropriate of you to request an engagement when a prior one has been confirmed, what you speak of is impossible.”

Maya clearly sought to offend Gouki— —or so was her guise — —

Gouki replied in a chilly tone.

“I apologize for being rude. But we too are making a serious request. It is not a joke of any sort.”

“A serious request? To seek the hand of my niece who’s already engaged to someone, what part of that is a serious request?”

“My son genuinely hopes to tie the knot with Miyuki-dono. If you were to accept our proposal of marriage, then we intend to give Masaki to the Yotsuba Family.”

The round table was astir. Carrying the title of “Crimson Prince”, Ichijou Masaki demonstrated a degree of power that’s combat worthy of that title even at the age of 13, also during the 2095 Yokohama Incident, even now as a 17-year-old youth, his reputation as a first-class combat magician is well known throughout the Ten Master Clans.

For Gouki to say that it would be fine to let go of such an heir. No matter how one looked at it, the deal was very much favorable to the Yotsuba Family. Since there was no amount of deception in Gouki’s words, even Maya had to recognize the proposition.

“Is that so? But I still cannot accept your request.”

Although the discomfort disappeared from Maya’s expression, her attitude did not turn cold.

“...The reason, may I hear it?”

“For Ichijou-dono, as a parent, to hope to fulfill your child’s wishes, that is something I understand as well. But if Ichijou-dono has considered your child’s feelings, then as an aunt, I must also consider my niece’s feelings.”

“Miyuki-dono’s feelings?”

“Yes. My niece, Miyuki, likes my son Tatsuya. I believe that Tatsuya too cares for Miyuki. I wish to respect both their feelings.”

To Maya’s words, Futatsugi Mai and Mutsuzuka Atsuko both deeply nodded. Such words after all resonated more easily with the female gender.

“Are Miyuki’s feelings unmovable? Could you perhaps give Masaki a chance?”

“A Chance?”

“Miyuki-dono likely does not know much about Masaki yet.”

“Is that not the same for Masaki-dono? Aside from appearance, your son likely does not know much about Miyuki.”

Subtly saying “Masaki was only attracted to her looks” made Gouki feel very ashamed. Despite it being the truth, he was defiant.

“Thus, I hope you would give them a chance for them to become acquainted. If both of them get to know each other well, and still she refuses to choose Masaki, then we will give up.”

“Ichijou-dono... Are you aware that since earlier, your family has been rather disrespectful to both Miyuki and Tatsuya? Especially towards my son, Tatsuya. What Ichijou-dono is saying can only be interpreted as calling Tatsuya inferior as a man in comparison to Masaki-dono.”

Gouki was at a loss of words. He had no intention of saying so but, he may have spoken out as a doting parent.

Towards Maya's harsh words, even Mai, who's role as the stopper, did not say anything to chide her. This was to say that the majority of the Family Heads felt that Gouki should be accountable for what he said.

Then Kouichi who did not think so, once again dredged up his claims.

"However if one were to shelve their romantic feelings and look at it objectively, I think an engagement between Masaki-dono and Miyuki-dono would be a good match. More than anything, it would avoid any harm that could come from a sanguineous marriage."

"Saegusa-dono... Are you saying that Miyuki-dono's feelings are not worthy of consideration?"

Mitsuya Gen, who had been silent until then, reproved Kouichi in a bitter voice.

But Kouichi did not withdraw.

"Suppressing one's emotions to a degree is necessary, especially as a successor to one of the Ten Master Clans. Is that not the case for everyone here?"

No voice of objection gave rise. What Kouichi said, everyone present knew.

"Also, Miyuki-dono is still young. If she were to get to know Masaki-dono, she may change her feelings."

"Is that so... chemistry between a man and a woman, if they do not get to know each other, one will never know."

The first voice who supported Kouichi, was Itsuwa Isami.

But the one who was most surprised at Isami's words was most

likely Kouichi. Though not apparent in his expression, Kouichi doubted Isami's intent in his heart.

"I too thought it was a good pair, requesting for an engagement with Saegusa-dono's daughter, but... Mayumi-dono and Hiroshi's character didn't mix well, and in the end it did not go anywhere."

As Isami said, right before the Master Clans Conference, the Itsuwa Family broke off talks of marriage.

"Kouichi's claim that an engagement between the Ichijou Family's Masaki-dono and the Yotsuba Family's Miyuki-dono is reasonable. Their marriage will bring more and more development to Japan's Magic Community. Not to mention Ichijou-dono has said he is willing to give the Yotsuba Family Masaki-dono, I don't think it's such a bad deal to Yotsuba-dono."

With Isami's support, the winds began to change. In that instant, the tail wind was definitely blowing for Kouichi and Gouki.

But that wind was about to be broken in an instant.

"Itsuwa-dono. Our family does not consider or seek benefits from Miyuki's marriage."

Isami awkwardly looked down. Having realized his intention to induce discussion about short-term gain and loss, Maya flatly rejected him.

"I understand your stance; Miyuki is still young. I cannot say that the possibility of her feelings to change is zero. But that is as far as I can say, I think Masaki-dono should put in his own effort to move Miyuki's heart. If Masaki were steal Miyuki away from Tatsuya, then even I wouldn't tie up Miyuki. To the Yotsuba Family, we will serve any command from Miyuki, but we may yield regarding the seat of the son-in-law."

“So the engagement is not annulled?”

“In exchange, you would not mind if Masaki-dono were to go after Miyuki-dono?”



Makoto and Mai confirmed Maya's meaning.

"That interpretation is fine. In the first place, dare I say, that Miyuki and Tatsuya's marriage is a legitimate thing recognized by the law. It's not anything that must result in accepting any objection by the law, is it?"

To Maya's words, Mai nodded.

"It is certainly as Yotsuba-dono said. Sanguineous marriage does indeed carry some risk. That said, Saegusa-dono's claim exceeds the scope of decisions that can be made in the Master Clans Conference."

Mai then moved her gaze from Kouichi to Gouki.

"Ichijou-dono, is that fine? Yotsuba-dono has said that despite Miyuki-dono's engagement, she will allow your son to interact with Miyuki-dono. The parents will not interfere with anything beyond that."

"...I understand. I will convey that to my son."

"I too, am fine with that."

Both Gouki and Kouichi decided to lay down arms.

"By the way, the allowing of one to date while they have a fiancée also apply to Tatsuya-dono?"

Of course, Kouichi was not of the type that would raise the white flag without conditions.

Under the gaze of Maya and Mai, Kouichi made a smile.

"As Itsuwa-dono has said earlier, the talks for the engagement between Itsuwa Family's Hirofumi and our Mayumi have broken down. If it goes well, I was hoping for Mayumi to marry Tatsuya-dono."

Kudou Retsu had been once referred to as a "Trickster" due to his magic, but perhaps in terms of personality, Kouichi possessed

similar traits.

As everyone was tired from the miasma thrown by Kouichi, the Master Clans Conference had a break.

Then ten minutes later, this time it was Maya who began with a bombshell.

Not an iffy thing like Kouichi's claim, but a big scandal.

"Everyone, I have something I would like to say."

"Oh. An issue raised by Yotsuba-dono is indeed rare. What would it be about."

Encouraged by Makoto, Maya smiled at Kouichi.

A shudder ran down the spines of the rest of the Ten Master Clans Heads'. The extent of their antagonism was such that even Katsuto who had yet to see it felt the same.

Maya slowly opened her glossy red lips.

"Has everyone heard of a man that goes by the name of Zhou Gongjin?"

The moment Maya said that, Makoto's body stiffened. Though Kouichi did not show any reaction but non-reaction was the same as saying that he indeed had knowledge about the subject.

"Zhou Gongjin...?"

"Yotsuba-dono, isn't that the famous Zhou Yu of Wu from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms?"

Maya shook her head while smiling in response to Mutsuzuka Atsuko and Yatsushiro Raizou's questions.

"Basing his headquarters in Yokohama's Chinatown, he's an Ancient Magician born on the continent. Taoists, I believe they were called, correct, Kudou-dono?"

“A, aah. Ancient Magicians from the continent are often called as such.”

Makoto used all his strength to suppress his body from trembling.

“Kudou-dono, what happened? You seem to have a bad complexion.”

“No, it’s nothing, Mutsuzuka-dono.”

After tilting her head at the suspicious attitude of Makoto, she turned back to Maya’s direction.

“So, what about this Zhou Gongjin?”

“Anti-Magic International Political Organization ‘Blanche’. Hong Kong based International Crime Syndicate ‘No-Head Dragon’. The sabotage forces of the Great Asian Alliance that caused the Yokohama Incident. And then the incident that took place in the heart of Tokyo, the Vampire Incident which took the world by storm: ‘Parasites’. He is the man who helped orchestrate all of this, the mastermind that brought chaos to our country, or should I say, the mastermind designated to cause trouble in Japan.”

The conference room had a bustling atmosphere.

It wasn’t that there was an increase in chatter, there were barely ten people in the room. It was not a topic one could freely discuss with those next to them.

But even so, the shock that took away the calm and composed attitudes of the Heads of the Ten Master Clans stemmed from Maya’s short speech.

“Yotsuba-dono.”

Facing Maya, Raizou softly raised his hand. It seemed to be an unintentional habit from university.

“Just now you used the word ‘designated’ in past tense, which is to say he has already been disposed of? Or that he has fled the country?”

“Assisted by Ichijou Masaki-dono, and Kudou Minoru-dono, Zhou Gongjin was killed by Tatsuya last October.”

Makoto expressed a feeling of surprise. He had heard the report from Masaki but he didn’t hear from Minoru.

However, the change in his facial expression was not noticed by the other Heads. This was because all eyes were concentrated on Maya, excluding Kouichi, Gouki and Makoto, the Heads were nodding in admiration.

“Minoru-dono, which is to say, Kudou-dono’s youngest son?”

Makoto barely faked a smile while nodding to Raizou’s question.

“The Ichijou Family’s Masaki-dono, the Yotsuba Family’s Tatsuya-dono, and the Kudou Family’s Minoru-dono... how reliable.”

Mitsuya Gen broadly complimented.

“That’s right. It really brings me joy to hear the next generation is growing up so splendidly. I can believe that the future of Japan’s Magic Community is secure.”

Futatsugi Mai accompanied.

“Both Juumonji-dono and I feel that, even though they will only be juniors in the next generation, they are indeed reliable.”

Mutsuzuka Atsuko’s words invited laughter from the seniors.

However the peaceful atmosphere was shattered by Maya’s next words.

“Saegusa-dono. Were you in collusion with Zhou Gongjin?”

The round table returned to silence.

“...Yotsuba-dono, does that claim have a legitimate basis?”

Itsuwa Isami squeezed out in a hoarse voice.

Kouichi remained silent.

“Saegusa-dono. You used your subordinate, Nakura Saburou, to establish contact with Zhou Gongjin, indirectly using Civil Rights Party’s Congressman Kanda to instigate the anti-Magician movement. Do you have any objections?”

Kouichi slowly opened his mouth.

“Yotsuba-dono, I too, would like to hear the basis of this.”

Kouichi and Maya coldly glared at each other.

“If I may speak.”

In that tense moment, it was the youngest, Katsuto, who spoke up.

In spite of the gazes focused on him, Katsuto began his testimony in a calm tone.

“The fact that Saegusa-dono instigated the anti-Magician movement is the truth. I heard it from Saegusa-dono himself.”

All the gazes on Katsuto, shifted to Kouichi.

“Saegusa-dono, do you have any excuses?”

Atsuko sharply cross-examined Kouichi.

Kouichi had a smile that had a feeling of complacency and calmness.

“What Juumonji-dono said is true. What Yotsuba-dono said is somewhat true as well. Just that the order is somewhat mistaken.”

“The order? What do you mean?”

Gouki spat out. But Kouichi’s smile did not falter.

“My subordinate established contact with Zhou Gongjin, only after the anti-Magician movement was more stable after First High’s Stellar Furnace Experiment. Aah, now that we’re on this topic, that too was the achievement of Yotsuba Family’s Tatsuya-dono. That experiment was highly evaluated by Rozen’s Branch, and radically changed the winds. What a spectacular son.”

“So, what about it?”

Gouki irritably rebuked Kouichi.

Kouichi did not delay the conversation any longer, or do anything that could irritate Gouki.

“When I established contact with Zhou Gongjin, it was to stop the Mass Media’s attempts to target Magicians as a whole. Of course, I had to give something in return, something that would be disadvantageous to Japan’s Magic Community.”

“Aa, you’re right. You joined hands with Zhou Gongjin after the instigation of the anti-Magician movement.”

Maya frankly admitted Kouichi’s claim.

“But the fact that Zhou Gongjin caused so much harm to our country is an indisputable fact. To collaborate with someone like that, is very inappropriate for someone from the Ten Master Clans. Everyone, is that not the case?”

The reason Maya wasn’t overly respectful with her words was due to this.

“Certainly.”

Ichijou Gouki expressed his consent briefly.

“It is as Yotsuba-dono said.”

Mutsuzuka Atsuko, “Unfortunately, it is as she said.”

Yatsushiro Raizou, “Saegusa-dono, at the time, I too said that it would have been better for you to stop.”

Juumonji Katsuto, “Saegusa-dono may have had his own ideas but...”

Itsuwa Isami, “I cannot defend Saegusa-dono.”

Mitsuya Gen, “Saegusa-dono. No matter what your intents were, you crossed a line you should never cross, and collaborated with someone you never should have.”

Futatsugi Mai, everyone supported Maya.

Kouichi, who was still smiling, was now cornered.

Gouki, Atsuko, Raizou, Katsuto, Isami, Gen, Mai’s eyes, all pointed in Kudou Makoto’s direction, who had yet to express his opinion.

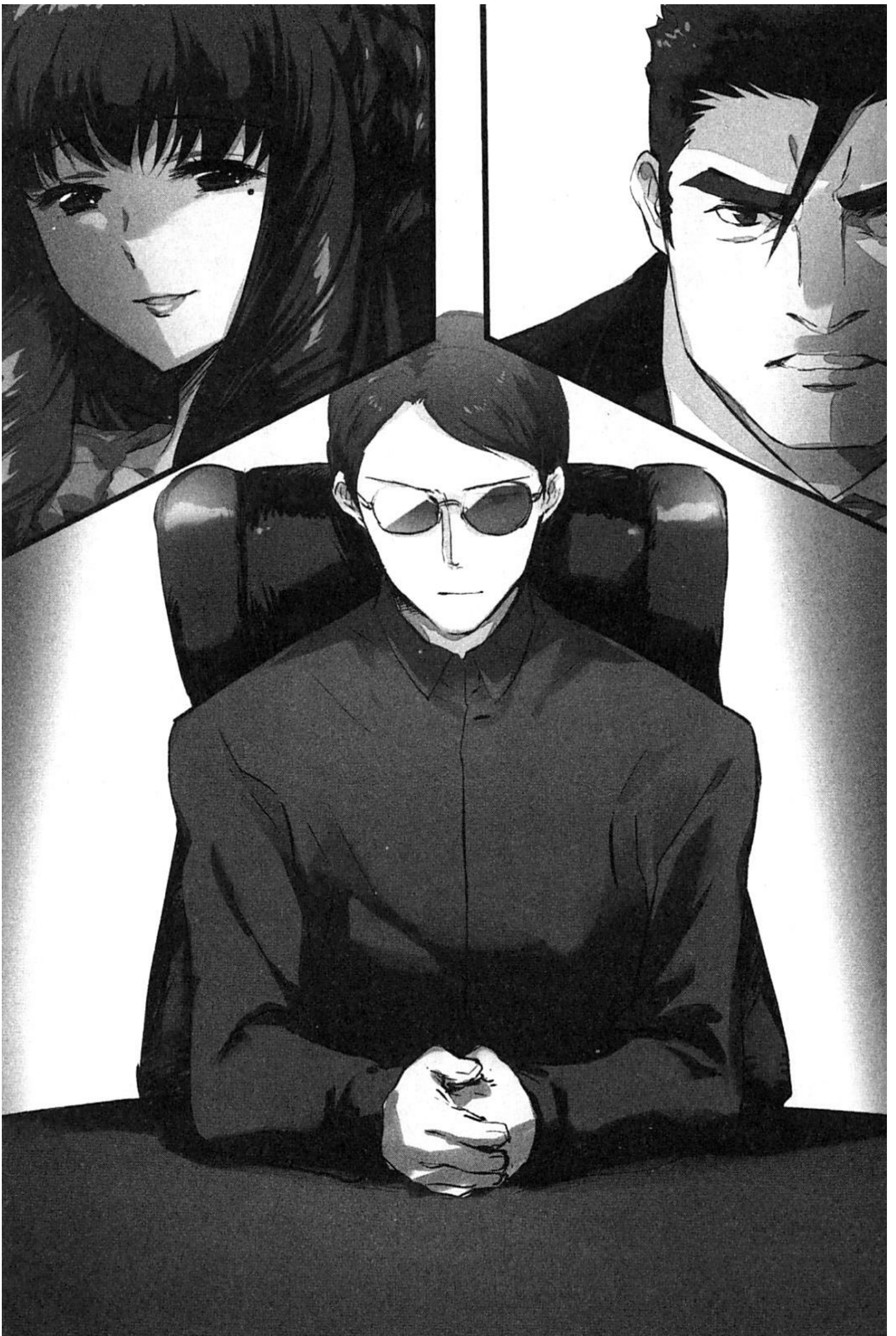
But what Mai said to Kouichi at the end applied to Makoto as well.

Though it could be said that his circumstances were different from Kouichi, he too had been in collusion with Zhou Gongjin.

Makoto’s worries were interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Would you mind if I enter?”

The voice that likely came from the other side of the door was from an old man that all the members knew very well.



Sitting closest to the door, Katsuto stood up and looked at the rest.

Though there were others who agreed, no one was shaking their head.

Katsuto walked to the doorway, and opened the door.

Standing behind the door was the retired Kudou Retsu.

“Sensei, I haven’t seen you in a long time. Even so, what business do you have today?”

Mai invited Retsu in cordially. Katsuto tried to offer his seat but, Retsu smiled and waved his hand.

“Apologies but, I overheard the topic at hand.”

Retsu immediately cut to the chase.

Though there was nobody who would call it into question, it was a rule that the topics of discussion during the Conference were to remain absolutely confidential. The Kudou Family wasn’t the first to use methods to leak the general basis of the conference.

“For everyone to hold Kouichi accountable is obvious. But, I would like for that to be put on hold.”

Retsu referred to Kouichi not as “Saegusa-dono” but by his first name.

By doing so, he made it clear that his intent was not to speak as a former member of the Master Clans Conference but as the Patriarch of Japan’s Magic Community—the speech of an old man who held no authority.

“Instigating the anti-Magician movement was something I too discussed with Kouichi. And I did not stop Kouichi.”

Glances were exchanged in a flurry across the round table. Excluding Maya, Kouichi and Makoto; Gouki, Mai, Gen, Isami,

Atsuko, Raizou, and Katsuto were all contemplating Retsu's real intentions. Makoto wasn't even aware of his father's intentions. The only people who had guessed Retsu's motive were Maya and Kouichi.

"Also, if you're talking about relations with Zhou Gongjin, then the Kudou Family is not innocent either. Although we did discuss this plan, we hadn't take any concrete actions. I took the magic provided by Zhou Gongjin to use Parasites as non-human magical weapons, with innocent young people as guinea pigs. If Maya's son did not stop it, then something irreversible might have occurred."

As Retsu faced Maya, she nodded and faintly smiled. She had intended to strike Kouichi firmly, but she wasn't driven by that goal. If Retsu wanted to cover for Kouichi, she had no intention of ruining the student-teacher relationship.

"If you compare the actions we took, Kouichi's do not exceed mine in severity."

"But Sensei."

Retsu turned towards Gouki's direction and signaled for him to stop speaking.

"The Kudou Family shall retire from the Ten Master Clans. With that, could you consider this case concluded?"

"Senior..."

Makoto looked up at his father with a shocked expression.

As Retsu made his suggestion, he directed a harsh glance towards his son.

"Makoto, you are guilty of directly accommodating Zhou Gongjin. The incident caused by the Taoists sent by Zhou Gongjin has greatly inconvenienced Yotsuba-dono's son, and Ichijou-dono's son. For this kind of outcome, you should be speaking up,

not me.”

“Senior... Father!”

“Makoto, I’m disappointed in you.”

“Sensei, would that be okay with you?”

The one who soothed Retsu was Maya.

“If the Kudou Family takes full responsibility for this, then the Yotsuba Family shall consent. It would be fine if Saegusa-dono makes amends with future contributions.”

Retsu did not cover for Kouichi just because of their teacher and student relationship. Makoto, his son, would hold higher priority in that case.

Currently, the magic group with the most power in Japan isn’t the Nation Defense Force, but actually the Yotsuba Family followed closely by the Saegusa Family. These two Families are the two greatest authorities in the Japanese Magic Community. If the Saegusa Family was to be excluded from the Ten Master Clans, it would be a very undesirable outcome. For the sake of maintaining order, they must remain a part of the Ten Master Clans.

To ensure the Ten Master Clans that he created would survive, Retsu covered for Kouichi. Maya seeing through his intentions wasn’t difficult.

“If Yotsuba-dono says so...”

“It’s certainly true that if the Saegusa Family were to be removed from the Ten Master Clans, the hole left behind would be too great.”

Atsuko and Raizou agreed with Maya successively. Yet Kouichi’s only eye still remind cold.

There were no voices of objection.

Kouichi looked at the circumstances with a poker face that lacked a smile.

Maya faced such a Kouichi and gave a smile.

“Makoto, let’s go.”

Ordered by Retsu, Makoto stood up tardily from the Ten Master Clans seat.

“Everyone, excuse us.”

Retsu lightly nodded and left the meeting room.

Makoto followed behind with drooping shoulders.

The door shut with a pattern sound.

“Very well then.”

As the stopped time began moving, Itsuwa Isami started with a harried voice.

“We must decide on a family to replace the Kudou Family.”

“Tomorrow is the Selection Meeting. Why not do it then?”

Mitsuya Gen objected, “In the event where a vacancy occurs in the Ten Master Clans, a replacement member will be chosen to fill in that role. Even if it would only be a day, the Ten Master Clans should not be in a state where it’s missing any members.”

In replacement of Makoto, Futatsugi Mai supported Isami’s suggestion as the next eldest.

“Is that so. Who would be a good choice? Any candidates?”

Gouki questioned with a helpless expression.

“Then.”

As Maya said that, all eyes were on her.

“How about Shippou-dono? The Head, Takumi-dono is wise,

though they have few disciples, they have considerable economic strength.”

Gouki, Katsuto and Isami glanced at Kouichi’s face. Though it was well known by the others that the Saegusa Family and the Shippou Family had a bone to pick, Kouichi showed no sign of any reaction.

“Shippou-dono... Any other recommendations?”

There were no Heads who answered Mai’s question.

“Very well, the new member of the Ten Master Clans is decided to be Shippou-dono. Though it will only be for a day but, who shall convey it to Shippou-dono?”

“Very well, I shall do so.”

Katsuto raised his hand, and exited the conference room to make the call.

“Wait a moment, Juumonji-dono.”

Mai voiced out when his back was to her.

“We shall be taking a break for a while. How about resuming in 30 minutes?”

There was no objection to Mai’s words.



The next day, February 5th.

Right after entering Class 2-E, Tatsuya was visited by Shippou Takuma.

“Shippou, is something wrong?”

Faster than Tatsuya could ask, a voice filled with curiosity greeted Takuma, and the owner of said voice was the Club Activities’ senior, Tomitsuka.

“No, it’s just... I wanted to express my gratitude to Shiba-

senpai.”

Takuma uncomfortably replied so.

Well, such feelings of discomfort were perfectly understandable. It was a well-known fact that Takuma had caused quite the commotion back in April with his series of duels.

His recent change of attitude was unanimously acknowledged by not only the freshmen, but even the upperclassmen. Even so, his rudeness to Tatsuya was still fresh in their memory. This was made evident by the numerous inquisitive looks that people gave him whenever he talked to Tatsuya.

In addition to this, Erika and Leo also gave him gazes of ill will.

Although Mikihiko had come to Class 2-E today, his look bore the same unfavorable feelings as Erika’s and Leo’s.

“Gratitude? I don’t remember doing anything worth being thanked for?”

What saved Takuma was that Tatsuya apparently didn’t hold a grudge at all. It was quite the opposite in fact, having seen Takuma’s efforts during the Nine Schools Competition, he now had a better opinion of him.

“Umm... I heard that Yotsuba-dono recommended my family as a replacement for one of the Ten Master Clans...”

“My apologies, but this is the first I’ve heard of it.”

Tatsuya wasn’t pretending, he genuinely wasn’t aware of it. To begin with, the fact that a “replacement” was needed meant that one of the current Ten Master Clans had stepped down from their seat. Just what kind of incident had occurred? Tatsuya couldn’t help but wonder.

“Even if it’s just as a replacement until a proper selection is made today... I’m still extremely grateful. Thank you very much!”

It had probably been extremely embarrassing for him, after immediately finishing his sentence, Takuma went back to his own classroom at full speed.

Tatsuya was vaguely aware of the fact that Takuma was sensitive about everything related to the Ten Master Clans.

However, to think that it brought him such a level of happiness...

Tatsuya was reminded once again of the fact that every person had a different sense of values, and of what was important.



Today was the day of the Ten Master Clans Selection Meeting, an event that only took place once every 4 years. Along with the Ten Master Clans, the respective Heads of the 18 Assistant Houses could be seen.

Aside from the Kudou Family, everyone was present.

“Well then, the Ten Master Clans Selection Meeting can begin.”

Following Futatsugi Mai’s declaration, all the members stood up.

“First of all, as per the tradition, if anyone present here has an objection or feels dissatisfaction at the current line-up of Members of the Ten Master Clans, please remain standing. If you don’t have any, sit down within the next minute.”

The primary voting is a peculiar tradition of the Selection Meeting. Even if only one person remained standing, then papers would be distributed and the ballot would move on to the actual voting. The vote would decide who would become the 10 Houses that would be the most suitable to hold the title of Ten Master Clans, and the counting would be done under the supervision of 3 Members of the current Ten Master Clans as well as 3 Members of the 18 Assistant Houses for a total of 6 Members.

However, this would be a “signed vote”. The criteria for choosing the next Ten Master Clans would be the power carried by each House at this point in time. However, “Magical Power” wouldn’t be the only factor in this, for the ability to support the Nation would also be required.

Even if you were to vote for an unsuitable House, you wouldn’t lose your Number. However, the following 4 years would have your House bear the penalty, or rather, stigma of not having discerning eyes.

Following Mai’s instructions, the first 10 Members around the table returned to their seat.

The current Heads of the 18 Assistant Houses also started to sit one by one.

When the second hand of the clock had done a 180°, the unexpected happened.

The Heads of the Kuki Family and the Kuzumi Family sat down.

Those two had been expected to vote for the now dismissed Kudou Family’s inclusion in the new Ten Master Clans, so this action struck a blow to the other members of the 18 Assistant Houses who hadn’t foreseen this turn of events.

The members who were still standing up looked at each other.

One by one, people sat down as if stopped dead in their tracks.

When 50 seconds had elapsed, there was no one left standing.

When the one-minute mark was reached, Mai stood up once again.

“Then, for the next 4 years, the Ichijou Family, Futatsugi Family, Mitsuya Family, Yotsuba Family, Itsuwa Family, Mutsuzuka Family, Saegusa Family, Shippou Family, Yatsushiro Family and the Juumonji Family will be known as the Ten Master Clans.

Everyone, I expect your continued cooperation.”

The other nine members of the table stood up, and following Mai’s words, bowed.

The 18 Assistant Houses who were surrounding the new Ten Master Clans joined in a round of applause.

Once the selection of the new Ten Master Clan ended, it was part of tradition that the 18 Assistant Houses leave to allow the Ten Master Clans to discuss about their new organization and structure. However, when the Heads of the Kuki, and Kuzumi Families tried to leave, Mai called them to a stop.

“Kuki-dono, Kuzumi-dono, please wait for a moment.”

“Futatsugi-dono?”

“Is something the matter?”

“There is something I would like to ask of you two. Would you mind giving me a little bit of your time?”

The Heads of the Kuki and Kuzumi Families nodded. When the other Members of the 18 Assistant Houses finished retiring, only the Ten Master Clans’ remained, as well as two families bearing the Number “Nine”, for a total of 12 names.

“What did you want to ask of us?”

“Futatsugi-dono, allow me to take it from here.”

The one who stopped Mai had been Shippou Takumi, the newest member of the Ten Master Clans.

“Kuki-dono, Kuzumi-dono. Even though my family was bestowed the honor of being part of the Ten Master Clans, quite frankly, we don’t have the numbers that would be required to fulfill our duties. Normally we would have to take the supervision of the Kyoto area in Kudou-dono’s stead, but this is

too big a duty for my family in its current state.”

“In that case, why don’t you ask for Yotsuba-dono or Futatsugi-dono’s help? If Kyoto is a problem, then Ichijou-dono also has responsibilities towards this area.”

Takumi shook his head with a smile at the proposal by the Head of the Kuki Family.

“That is also an idea. However, I want the Kudou Family to continue to watch over the Kyoto-Shiga and the Kii Peninsula. Of course, the Shippou Family doesn’t plan on only making demands. I would like every one of the ‘Nine’ to lend my family their strength.”

After a moment of wide-eyed surprise, the Heads of the Kuki and Kuzumi Families smiled broadly.

“Understood.”

“I will consult about this matter with Makoto-sama, we will definitely have a positive answer.”

“I’m counting on you.”

Takumi bowed deeply, the Heads of both the Kuki and the Kuzumi Families also bowed politely.

After their departure, a somewhat relaxed mood drifted in the conference room.

“Well then, let’s continue the Master Clans Conference.”

“A counter-plan to the Humanist ideology right?”

Mai’s words invited this question.

“No, before that we have to talk about this suspicious ship spotted near Izu.”

The one who had interrupted was Gouki.

“Ichijou-dono... There’s no hurry now is there?”

Although Isami reproved him with a shocked expression,

“If it is a terrorist ship, I can’t imagine the other side will keep waiting.”

Gouki didn’t yield.

“I don’t mind, Itsuwa-dono.”

The one who answered with this was Kouichi, who had regained his usual composure overnight.

“Then let’s hear more about this matter.”

Although Kouichi’s attitude was the same as ever, it appeared that Gouki didn’t want to associate with him anymore. For someone like Gouki, secret communication with the enemy was an inexcusable act.

“There was no reaction when searching for a Magician on the freighter Yotsuba-dono gave us coordinates for. Neither weapons nor ammunition were found on board.”

“Did you find anything?”

“There is a possibility that explosives were being transported. Since it’s also possible that the ship will be used for escape purposes, we plan on keeping it under observation.”

“How about the USNA’s movements?”

Taking Gouki’s momentum, this time it was Katsuto’s turn to question Kouichi.

“An agent has been dispatched. In other words, the group that has betrayed the USNA has been found out, but they’re not being that tactful about things. It’s quite possible that this duty wasn’t an order from the USNA Government itself.”

“In other words, a favorite hunter of theirs is on the prowl, hiding somewhere?”

“The cruiser that Yotsuba-dono received information on was confirmed as outside of territorial waters. He could unexpectedly be hiding out there.”

Hearing Kouichi’s answer, Isami wore a pensive expression.

“If it’s at sea, should I go and poke around? It should be possible to camouflage it into an accident using the natural disaster excuse.”

“The problem isn’t so much the hunter from the USNA, but the terrorists that have infiltrated our country.”

At Isami’s proposal, Atsuko brought forth a diametrically opposite opinion.

“That is certainly the case. We have no evidence of their presence at the moment, but we also don’t have any evidence of their absence. It’s really worrying that we don’t even know if they’re lurking about.”

Raizou was supporting Atsuko’s argument.

“They might even be targeting this very Master Clans Conference for all we know.”

This must have been a pure coincidence.

However, it was the truth.

Immediately after Raizou had said this, an overpowering sound accompanied by powerful vibrations invaded the conference room.



February 5th, 2097 A.D., 10:33 A.M.

It was currently break time between second and third period at First High.

A buzzing sound came from Tatsuya’s pocket as he was heading towards the Practice Room, it was an emergency signal.

Taking out his terminal and confirming the contents, you could read on his face that something terrible had just happened.

“Sorry, go on ahead without me!”

Tatsuya left his classmates, among which was Mizuki, and dashed towards the Practice Room.

Tatsuya, who had received his teacher Jennifer Smith’s blessing to leave early, met Miyuki on the way towards the main gate.

“Onii-sama also received the emergency signal?”

Miyuki, whose face had lost all trace of color, asked Tatsuya with a short sentence.

“Let’s go.”

Tatsuya answered with an even shorter sentence.

Although Miyuki had nodded and was about to hasten her pace, a voice called her from the behind.

Minami came out of the entrance, accompanied by her classmate Saegusa Kasumi, as well as her sister Izumi and last but not least, Shippou Takuma. All of them were related to the Ten Master Clans. All of them, with the exception of Minami, were blood-related to the Ten Master Clans.

“Miyuki-senpai.”

Izumi ran towards Miyuki.

“Izumi-chan, too.”

“So it wasn’t a false alarm then!”

Miyuki nodded to her question.

Izumi started to tremble uncontrollably.

“We’re going to see what happened for ourselves. What about all of you.”

Tatsuya, who was just a step away, asked the freshmen.

“I’m coming too.”

Takuma immediately answered so.

“We’re going as well.”

Kasumi grasped her trembling sister’s hand.

Minami came closer to Miyuki. So that she could shield her at a moment’s notice.

Leading the group, Tatsuya and the five other people hastened towards the station.



During the same time, at Third High.

“Masaki, what happened!”

Masaki had dashed out of the classroom after having asked permission to leave early. Kichijouji, who had run after him until he was out of breath, asked such.

“My old man has been attacked.”

Regretting even the time spent looking back, Masaki answered.

“An attack? But... Right about now it should still be in the middle of the Master Clans Conf...”

“I’m saying that the Master Clans Conference was the victim of a terrorist attack.”

“What did you say!”

Seeing Kichijouji at a loss for words, Masaki turned around.

“I can’t be sure about what exactly happened from the emergency signal alone. I only know that he’s still alive. I’m heading there by helicopter. I’m counting on you to watch over Akane and the others.”

“A-alright, I get it! Be careful, Masaki.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Masaki wasn't heading home, he was heading towards the company heliport.



Simultaneously, at the Magic University.

“Saegusa-san, something the matter.”

During a lesson that was in the form of a debate, the female teacher called out to Mayumi.

“My apologies, Sensei. Could I borrow your ear for a moment.”

With a dark expression floating on her face, Mayumi walked with quick—steps towards the teacher's desk.

She discreetly showed the teacher her terminal which was still displaying the emergency signal.

Just as the teacher was about to raise her voice, she managed to keep it under control with a gesture, she then brought her ear close.

“I recall the people in my family were rather anxious. My older brothers might even attempt to go on-site, I would like to go back home and try to have everyone settle down.”

The teacher nodded with a serious look.

Not letting her classmates feel any ambiguity, Mayumi announced with a smile and a slightly apologetic expression that she had to leave for familial business.



The explosion had occurred right behind the conference room's doors, crimson flames licked the walls.

However, those flames were extinguished at once.

“Juumonji-dono, exemplary.”

Not a single member of the Master Clans Conference had a bruise. Both the heat and the impact were completely hampered by Katsuto's heatproof shield.

“Mutsuzuka-dono as well, as expected.”

The erasure of the flames was caused by Mutsuzuka Atsuko's Heat Manipulation. For the Magicians of the “Six”, putting out a flame that couldn't even melt steel was child's play.

“We should probably head towards the exit. If we get buried alive, it'll be too much of a bother to escape.”

While Futatsugi Mai was prohibiting the oxidation of the structure from the heat so there would be no spreading of poisonous fumes, she made that comment with a composed voice.

“Agreed. It seems like a considerably large-scale suicide-bombing operation has begun.”

While Mitsuya Gen had several magics' on standby, he nodded to Mai's words.

“Puppet terrorists! Such a terrible thing they've done.”

Gouki clicked his tongue intensely upon seeing the suicide bombing continue. Puppet terrorism was basically suicide bombing using humans as puppets to perform the act. Using Magic or drugs to make human dolls out of human beings, there were also ways to deprive someone of self-control with magic.

What Gouki sensed was the latter, a magic that controlled the flesh. He felt slow-moving presences in the first floor's lobby, as well as the corridors of every floor, it seemed to be going downward.

Although the Ichijou family and the Magicians of the “One” were skilled in Magic that interfered with the flesh and body, magic that manipulates the movement of the body has always been forbidden. There have been examples of “losing one's

number” for those who ignored that law. That is why even if Gouki understood what exactly was happening, he didn’t know how to stop this wicked thing known as Puppet Terrorism.

“This is bad.”

Sensing that the floor was about to collapse, Yatsushiro Raizou executed Gravity-Control Magic. It wasn’t comparable to the one used for Flight Magic, and lifting an area of this size which lost all support required tremendous effort.

“Let’s make haste.”

Everyone nodded to Kouichi’s words, Maya, Mai and Atsuko left the room, the ten Magicians aimed for the outside as a group.

Aiming at the bombers who were roaming around in the corridors, Ichijou Gouki unleashed “Rupture”.

“They aren’t suicide bombers. They’re just manipulated corpses carrying bombs.”

The flow of insults that Gouki, who had just blown off a corpse’s arm to obstruct the detonation procedure, was spitting in an angry voice, surpassing the others’ expectations.

To prevent getting buried due to the crumbling floor, the leaders of the Ten Master Clans decided to go to the rooftop and jump off from there while disposing of the occasional corpse bomber they encountered.

It was Mitsuya Gen and Saegusa Kouichi who were the fastest in taking action towards the bombers. There was a technique that originally allowed one to perform up to a maximum of nine different Magic Sequences at the same time, then store them to allow a simultaneous, instantaneous release of all of them. “Speed-Loader”, using Kouichi’s “Octet” allowed him to maintain 8 different Magics from 4 different Systems on standby and select

which Magic he needed to deal with a wide variety of situations instantly. The walking corpses could not even hope to approach them.

The odd time an explosion couldn't be prevented, the multi-layered defensive wall "Phalanx" was the perfect tool.

Raizou's Gravity-Control Magic was there to prevent the ground from suddenly falling under their feet.

Atsuko's Heat Manipulation Magic could erase any fire.

Futatsugi Mai would remove the poisonous fumes, Maya was acting as a flashlight in those lightless corridors once the flames were put out.

Itsuwa Isami and Shippou Takumi didn't have a chance to do anything.

It was impossible for those bomb-carrying corpses to kill or even wound any of them.

The Family Heads had already noticed this fact.

"It's going to be tough finding a countermeasure to the Media."

Gen complained all the while making Swiss cheese out of the corpses.

"I guess we have no way of deceiving them at all."

While putting out a wall of flames, Atsuko made a comment with a tone of resignation.

"Although we managed to get a photograph of the fact that it was corpses who were holding the bombs... I think revealing this to the public would have quite the negative effect."

Isami, who had given up on any hope of getting a turn at doing anything, he agreed while taking photos.

"Still, I doubt purposely injuring ourselves would help much, if at all."

Hearing Maya's point, Raizou shrugged his shoulders.

“Shall we hide until the flames of their fury cool down.”

Raizou's comment which might have been either a joke or a serious statement, no voice of objection came.



February 5th, 2097 A.D., 10:30 A.M.

The number of victims of the Hakone XXXX Hotel's terror bombings came out to be 22, and it became a disaster with as many as 34 casualties.

Furthermore, the number of uninjured people was 33. The number of Magicians among them was 27.

The harshest criticism came from the public opinions of those who claimed that the Magicians had prioritized their own well-being above that of others.

(Electronic version of the newspaper dating from February 6th 2097 A.D.)

Afterword

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Have you enjoyed, “Mahouka Koukou no Rettousei” Volume 17 “Master Clans Conference Arc” <Part 1>? This time around action wasn’t a factor, instead I tried to introduce plenty of love-hate components. (Lie) Not all of the men and woman are pessimistic about the establishment of the Class One couple. I think the majority is rather “glad” and would congratulate the two of them, and those who are on the side of “They are stuck together willfully” will think that it’s common. As for the couple themselves, if people think about them living as an established couple later on, it would probably be best to have them give their blessings.

But due to people being friends, acquaintances, and perhaps something that should be expected from a rival’s grief, it isn’t rare for “lover” relationships to be formed. They’re certainly present within today’s world. Surely the majority lies in this direction for fictional worlds.

However, speaking of established couples who were urged by their parents... How’s this: I think the author himself should become engaged before they officially become a couple. Well with the case (Refrained due to Spoilers), the person himself might be thankful since he has a clear mind to do as such. There are tons of late-bloomers though.

But I think (Refrained to due Spoilers) is an extreme nuisance.

One's true feelings get set aside.

Although it was slightly different from the previous illustrations, Lina had appeared in the storyline for around one year now. She is an easy character to write so I really want to include her a lot more... as of now, she has yet to depart from America. Even though she's appeared on stage for a while, perhaps it will take form this time. Too bad.

Well, the next book will be "Master Clans Conference (II)". This section will be made up of three parts just like the "Visitors Arc". The content will be similar to that of the "Visitors Arc". You might say that the games "Out of Order" and "Lost Zero" are similar.

...Since I won't try to "not spoil anything anymore", please look forward to enjoying the next book "Master Clans Conference Arc (II)".

(Satou Tsutomu)

Illustrations

AS453AE999AB5E1D0DD478396DF78692AB785A61



Cover



Teaser #1



Teaser #2



Teaser #3



Teaser #4



Teaser #5



Chapter 1



Chapter 2



Chapter 3



Chapter 3



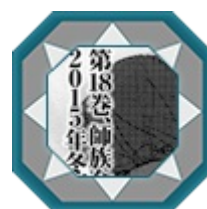
Chapter 4



Chapter 5



Chapter 5



Advert

Notes

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1. 📦 **Boku (僕)**: Is a masculine form of 私 (watashi). It is mostly used by males, especially those in their youth, but tomboys are known to use the word as well.
2. 📦 **RFID**: RFID stands for Radio-Frequency IDentification. The acronym refers to small electronic devices that consist of a small chip and an antenna. The chip typically is capable of carrying 2,000 bytes of data or less.



The RFID device serves the same purpose as a bar code or a magnetic strip on the back of a credit card or ATM card; it provides a unique identifier for that object. And, just as a bar code or magnetic strip must be scanned to get the information, the RFID device must be scanned to retrieve the identifying information.

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絡まり合う人間模様。
日々悪化していく社会情勢。

やがて事態は、
達也たちが恐れていた方向へ
進んでしまう……!!

そして真由美も、いつの間にか
舞台に押し上げられていた。

死体を操る魔法で自爆テロを敢行させるという、
この残酷な計画を企てた黒幕である「賢人」は、
気配を消して日本に潜伏していた。
この自爆テロ事件によって、世論が魔法師を糾弾しはじめ、
人間主義の勢力が勢いづく中、十師族は黒幕の捜査を決める。
その実働部隊は、七草家と十文字家の指揮により動き始め――。
「四葉家の司波達也殿がお前と同様、十文字殿の下で捜索に加わる。将輝、意地を見せるように、
同じく捜査メンバーに加わった司波達也に対抗するように東京へ向かうのだった。
克人、真由美、将輝と協力して達也は「隠微(フジ)」の行方を探る。
しかし、手掛かりを掴んだ達也の前に思わぬ敵が立ち塞がる。
その一方で、将輝が思い掛けない手を使つて、
深雪にアプローチを試みる。

二〇九七年、世界中の魔法師が注目する中、箱根のホテルで開かれた師族会議は、
数々の衝撃的な案件が扱われていた。
一条家次期当主・一条将輝による四葉家次期当主・司波深雪への婚約申し込み、
人間主義者(反魔法師運動)を行う過激勢力への対策強化、
七草家による周公瑾との裏取引への糾弾、
そして「九島家の辞退」と「七草家の加入」……。
互いのパワーバランスを牽制する知謀知略の戦いが繰り広げられ、
過去にない波乱を生んだ師族会議だが、
どうにか無事に閉幕を迎えようとしたその刹那――。
謎の爆発が会場を襲つた。

魔法科高校の劣等生

The irregular
at magic high school

佐島勤 illustration 石田可奈
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